A historical interpretation of the process of European integration

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Introduction: the historiography of European integration – numerous narratives, few interpretations

The historical literature on European integration appears to have finally reached a stage of maturity. The teleological or ideological viewpoints that had characterized many of the preliminary analyses in this field have been largely abandoned, and more recent studies seem to address the events related to the integration process in a more detached fashion (for a recent historiographical survey, see Loth 2008; Kaiser and Varsori 2010). In fact, although political scientists in particular have consistently sought to develop theoretical explanations for what has transpired in the European context since the late 1940s, historians continue to show a certain reluctance to deal with long-term dynamics or to attempt explanations that take into account the changes and ruptures that have occurred in the process of European construction (Loth 2009). The very term ‘construction’ seems inappropriate to the author, and it will be used in this article only for the sake of simplicity, with recognition of the fact that it entails certain serious inherent contradictions that often weaken attempts to analyse and explain the complex dynamics of the various periods of what is commonly referred to as European integration. This is not merely a matter of semantics, as the use of terms such as ‘construction’, ‘integration’, ‘founders’, etc. introduces misunderstandings (both in the historiographical debate and in the political sphere) that certainly do not facilitate the comprehension of a process that has undergone such radical changes over the decades that it now vastly differs from its original character – to the extent that between the late 1940s and today a variety of forms of European integration can be observed. These forms have fluctuated on the basis of developments in the political, economic and social evolution of the ‘Old World’, as well as the transformations that have characterized international events in the global dimension. In this context, the term ‘integration’ or ‘construction’ of the European Union becomes a kind of ‘container’ in which it is possible to identify various and sometimes conflicting phenomena and processes. In order to offer observations or interpretations of this development, it is therefore important to refer to a periodization that will facilitate the identification of turning points and changes in what we will continue to call, for the sake of convenience, ‘European integration’.
Despite the emphasis on change in these preliminary remarks, one cannot deny the existence of some elements of continuity. It is clear that today’s European Union has close ties with the European Economic Community that was established in 1957 on the basis of the Treaty of Rome. The fundamental institutions are still the Commission, the Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the European Court of Justice. Indeed, one could argue that the origins of these institutions go back several years earlier to 1950–1, to the so-called Schuman Plan and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), in which Monnet detected the idea of a ‘functionalist approach’ and the tripartite division of tasks and powers in the ECSC among the High Authority, the Common Assembly and the Council of Ministers (for an overview on institutions, see Bitsch et al. 1998). However, in a different context, one could ask rhetorically whether Italy in 2014 is equal to or even similar to the Italy of 1948, just because the country features a Constitution that in more than 60 years has not been subject to substantial changes. In other words, if there is a clear continuity from the perspective of the institutions, one might wonder whether it is the substance, the content, the characters or the objectives of the ‘integration’ that have truly undergone the relevant changes. Nevertheless, most of the histories reporting on the general character of European integration do not seem to address the question of change; instead, they appear to favour the view of continuity, or rather that of a substantial but gradual evolution, whereby they often seem to imply that the motivations, pressures and ‘values’ have remained the same since the original initiatives, and that these elements represent the fundamental objectives of the European Union (Du Reau 2008; Morelli 2011). This attitude is even more accentuated in the current political discourse in Brussels, Strasbourg and among almost all the leaders of the nations that form the EU. This is not to suggest that there has been a complete and decisive break (or even several breaks), but the idea of this close link to the past should be subjected to a thorough historical analysis. At least in the opinion of the author, it is enough to question the ambiguity of the term ‘founding fathers’ and the continuity with their ‘values’. Robert Schuman was born in 1886, Konrad Adenauer in 1876 and Alcide De Gasperi in 1881. All of these figures had reached maturity before the outbreak of the ‘Great War’ in the Europe of the ‘Belle Epoque’, a continent whose great powers ruled the world and were the centres of enormous colonial empires. Of course, the ‘founding fathers’ had also experienced the trauma of totalitarianism, the Second World War and the early stages of the Cold War. But what exactly was the Europe that was imagined by these statesmen, the Europe that they were seeking to build? On what values did they believe it would be possible to build a European federation? The Europe of Schuman, De Gasperi and Adenauer, which included the ECSC, the European Defence Community (EDC) and part of the initial phase of the European Economic Community (EEC), was moderate in its political nature, Christian (if not Catholic) in its values – obviously not in the sense of a clerical or ‘Vatican’ Europe, but nonetheless profoundly influenced by Christian values and ideals2 – definitely anti-Communist, fully integrated into the Western system and proud of its past history. This was a Europe that still controlled extensive colonial empires and believed at least in part in its civilizing mission through, for example, the ‘Eurafricque’ with respect to its colonial subjects in Africa and, to a limited extent, Asia (Bossuat and Bitsch 2005). Does anyone believe that the ‘founding fathers’ would recognize the idea of Europe, their idea of Europe, in the ongoing debates in the European Parliament, in the official publications of the EU or in the brochures available at each EU information point? Obviously, this point is not intended to praise the ‘good old days’, but simply to indicate how the apparent continuity in the history of the European Union is much weaker than is commonly asserted and to draw attention to the change factor, its character and its meaning.
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The origins of European integration: the role of the US and the impact of the Cold War

For a long time, a branch of the historiography of European integration has identified the origins of the process in the ideological elaborations of sectors of the resistance movement and the plans outlined by some governments in exile in London. It is true that the movements and personalities of the opposition to Nazism and Fascism, especially in Italy, France and Belgium, concerned themselves with the problem of overcoming the divisions and nationalistic conflicts that, in their opinion, were among the causes of the Second World War. It is equally true that the leaders in exile of some of the nations of occupied Europe found it useful to devise forms of cooperation in order to resolve their problems of security, as seen in the project that would lead to the Benelux union and the less successful plans for a Danubian federation and a Balkan federation.\(^3\) However, such plans and political considerations had minimal influence on the prospects for the post-war reorganization of the European continent. The determining factors in this context were the strategies of the ‘big three’: the policies pursued by the United States, Britain and the USSR until the end of the war in Europe did not foresee the emergence of alternative forms of strong European cooperation. Only in 1944–5 did Churchill begin to consider a Western European ‘bloc’ based on Franco-British cooperation, a plan to which Stalin immediately objected; the idea was quickly abandoned because London’s plans did not hold much interest for de Gaulle, who was in fact looking for an alliance with Moscow in a traditional anti-German accord. In the short period between the end of the war and the full manifestation of the confrontation between Washington and Moscow, the anti-fascist ruling classes of most countries on the European continent, both in the West and in the East, reasoned and acted on the basis of the defence of traditional national interests; these actors were anxious to recover a significant role for their own countries and determined to preserve national boundaries or to modify them to their advantage, seeking to position themselves favourably in relation to the members of the ‘grand alliance’ (on this transition to the Cold War, see Calandri and Varsori 2002). The negotiations for the peace treaties with Nazi Germany’s ‘satellites’ were significant in this regard; here, it is sufficient to note that two nations that would be among the future ‘founders’ of the European Community – Italy and France, led by politicians who would play key roles in the integration process – expended a great deal of effort and clashed bitterly over the fate of a few square kilometres, as in the case of the minute Briga and Tenda areas along Italy’s northwestern border (Lorenzini 2007).

The factors leading to the emergence – or, perhaps, the re-emergence – of the European project were, first, the Cold War and, second (and closely connected), the change in US foreign policy towards the USSR. It is certainly not a new revelation – much of the historiography on European integration has identified it as a determining factor since the 1970s and 1980s – that the Marshall Plan was the element that initiated the integration process or that the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) was indeed the first institution that sought to achieve European cooperation in the economic field.\(^4\) Other episodes in the policies of certain European countries seemed to signal this change as well: in particular, the signing of the Brussels Pact in 1948 and the establishment of the Council of Europe in 1949 (Varsori 1988; Bitsch 1997). These achievements were tied in with the flowering of a number of European movements within which the proponents of a federalist approach quickly gained the upper hand, as well as the spread of the European ‘discourse’ among pro-European intellectuals, politicians, trade unionists, etc., especially in France, Italy, the future West Germany and the three Benelux nations (Pistone 1992). In this process, there was an evident desire on the part of personalities such as Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi (just to mention the ‘founding
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fathers’) to find in a Europe that had almost been annihilated by two world wars a shared ideal that could facilitate the continent’s recovery in economic and political dimensions, but also in the context of the values of democracy – a democracy that in continental Europe between the two world wars had proven to be prone to serious limitations, major weaknesses and, in some cases, fatal flaws in the face of totalitarianism. This early European integration process also exhibited a variety of non-trivial contradictions. For one thing, it soon limited itself to what would become the ‘Europe of the Six’. This development excluded not only the states constituting the ‘Socialist Bloc’ and those still under the rule of fascist regimes, but also the Scandinavian democracies, Britain, some traditionally neutral countries and the weak Greek state, which was troubled by the legacy of a bloody civil war. Thus, even if the construction of Europe concerned Western Europe only, in effect it was focused on a very few states. These early attempts were also closely connected (one could argue that it was almost a reaction) to the conflict between East and West, with definite roots in the Cold War. At this stage, a considerable part of the French and Italian electorates (i.e. those represented by the French Communist Party [PCF] and the Italian Communist Party [PCI]) considered the European project to be merely a tool of US ‘imperialism’. Nor should it be overlooked that the influence of the United States proved to be critical; indeed, without its support it would have been unlikely that the European construction would have blossomed from the ideas of a tiny elite into a concrete political project: the OEEC would not have arisen without the Marshall Plan, the Brussels Pact proved to be a stepping stone for the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Council of Europe was a compromise between France and Britain in which each party sought to define which nation would lead the western part of the ‘Old World’ and assume the role of primary partner of the United States. The most important and lasting achievement of these early years of European integration was not a European agreement but rather the Atlantic Alliance – in other words, the Treaty of Washington in April 1949 that defined the structure of the Western system, under which (as it was hoped in Washington) a Western European subsystem would then be formed. Indeed, on the whole, the consensus on European integration was limited; the ‘myths’ and ‘models’ that were prevailing in Europe, representing the hopes and aspirations of millions of Europeans, were the ‘American’ model and the ‘Soviet’ one. Although some pro-European elites advocated a ‘European’ model that would be partially independent from Washington, in the view of the majority of the public, whether in favour of or hostile to the Western option, this ideal was ultimately identified as an aspect or a corollary of the American model. Besides, was not the most successful model of federal states that which was exemplified by the United States of America?

The ‘heroic’ phase of European integration and the emergence of the enlightened elite

The ninth of May is now observed as Europe Day. The reason is obvious and well known: on 9 May 1950, French foreign minister Robert Schuman issued a declaration inspired by Jean Monnet that would give rise to the Schuman Plan, the ECSC and the ‘functionalist’ method that would characterize (and in part still marks) the process of European integration, apparently therefore another important element of continuity that ties the actions of the ‘founding fathers’ to the present European Union (on Monnet’s extensive bibliography, see Roussel 1996). Indeed, the ECSC was no isolated project; it was soon joined by the Pleven Plan, the proposed EDC and, later, thanks to the initiative of Alcide De Gasperi, the proposed European Political Community (EPC) (Preda 1990, 1994; Dumoulin 2000). Up until the failure of the French National Assembly to reject the EDC in August 1954, European integration experienced one of its most
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intense and ‘heroic’ phases, a period in which inspiration and commitment were particularly strong; in these years, not surprisingly, the actions of the federalist movement seemed to be particularly significant, and Altiero Spinelli began to emerge on the political scene (on Spinelli, see Graglia 2008). But what were the motivations of the ‘founding fathers’? What was the nature of their strategies and their goals? The Schuman Plan and the Pleven Plan were certainly inspired by a clear desire for reconciliation between France and Germany, but the primary impetus behind the project of the Coal and Steel Community was the French need to ensure its supply of German coal, which was vital to the nation’s economy. In a broader context, Schuman and Monnet believed that such a ‘functionalist’ integration would allow France to control the resurgence of West Germany, placing Paris at the head of Western Europe at the expense of London and allowing France to become the main ally of the United States. For his part, Adenauer understood that adherence to Monnetian projects would permit the Federal Republic to recover international respectability, only a few short years after the defeat of Nazism and the end of the Second World War. On this basis, Bonn would be able to fulfil its long-term strategy of full integration into the West and, in the hopes of the West German Chancellor, lay the foundations for reunification (Spiereburg and Poidevin 1993; Ranieri and Tosi 2004). An often neglected aspect here is that the negotiations on the EDC were paralleled by negotiations in Bonn between the Federal Republic and the Western victors of the Second World War over the return of West Germany’s full sovereignty (on the figure of Adenauer, see Schwarz 1986/1991). Even for De Gasperi’s Italy, involvement in the ECSC was primarily seen as a tool that would allow Italy to regain its international status and permit the state steel industry to strengthen its role through acceptance of the challenge of international competition (Ranieri 1988: 345–56). As for the European Political Community, it was in part a response to a project (i.e. the EDC) that was perceived as detrimental to Italian interests (Varsori 2010a: 89–102). For the Benelux countries, ever since the dramatic events related to the German invasion of 1940, their decision-makers had understood that the security and prosperity of their countries were closely bound up with forms of multilateral cooperation (if not supranational integration) under which small countries would, inter alia, have a greater opportunity to defend their interests (for more detail, see Dumoulin 2000; Ballini 2009). In this era of ‘heroic’ Europeanism, the desire for and the ideals of integration were closely connected to the preservation of national objectives and to the strengthening of the ‘Western alliance’ in the face of international communism, which was perceived (at least until the death of Stalin) as particularly threatening and aggressive. A significant example of this attitude can be found in Alcide De Gasperi, whose thoughts and actions were a combination (without apparent contradiction) of defence of the European model, loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance and a desire to safeguard Italy’s interests (on Alcide De Gasperi, see Preda 2004). Further evidence in support of this interpretation is provided by the staunch US backing, both by the Democratic Truman administration and the Republican Eisenhower presidency, of European integration. The symbol of this strong Euro-American bond in an anti-Soviet era was Jean Monnet, the so-called inspirateur, a figure who (also on account of his background and his personal ties) embodied the concept of the ‘bridge’ between Europe and the United States – without, of course, losing sight of France’s interests (on Monnet, other than Roussel 1996, see also Bosuau and Wilkens 1999).

As noted above, in the summer of 1954 the failure of the EDC seemed to imply the collapse of the entire European system based on Monnet’s concepts in favour of a Euro-Atlantic connection, within which the British and French governments believed they could better defend their positions of ‘great powers’ in the context of traditional relations of alliance without transfers of sovereignty, although this did not exclude forms of close practical cooperation, especially in the military sector. The European project had met with a setback for various reasons: the death
of Stalin and the new ‘peace policy’ launched by the Soviet leadership diminished the need for unity in the defensive dimension, and there was a popular belief emerging in the ‘Europe of the Six’ that integration would primarily safeguard Washington’s interests rather than European ones. Another important reason, however, was the top-down, elitist nature of the European project that seemed to be somehow imposed on the population. The partial transfer of sovereignty in the economic area (as in the ECSC) was perceived as a limited technical solution that could be left to the ‘experts’, and this came to be largely accepted; however, in the political and military contexts, Monnet’s concepts clashed with traditions, values and sentiments that were rooted in the history of the European nations, making it much more difficult for the public to accept the EDC and the EPC.

The European economic dimension: the European Economic Community and the success of ‘Little Europe’

Once again, the stereotypical view of European integration depicts some of the ‘founding fathers’ as ready to ‘continue the journey’ of integration. They first met in Messina to ‘revive Europe’ and then in Rome to sign the treaties that would give rise to the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) and the EEC, which (thanks to its economic success) confirmed in the late 1950s and the 1960s the intuition of Monnet’s ‘pragmatic’ approach; however, at least according to a certain cliché, due to the ‘nationalism’ of de Gaulle European integration had not made much progress in the political arena. These interpretations appear outdated; the results of empirical research on specific episodes and individual countries offer a more complex perspective on the creation of the EEC and the first decade of its existence. The initial ‘re-launching of Europe’, to resort again to the stylistic terminology of the historiography, was once again the work of a tiny ‘elite’. This is undoubtedly true, but the success of this elite was due in part to the apparently technical nature of the issues raised by the establishment of the Economic Community and the Atomic Energy Community. A rapid analysis of the press reports of that time or the political debates in the various countries of the ‘Six’ would be sufficient to demonstrate that the ‘re-launching of Europe’ aroused much less interest than other processes or events such as the confrontation between East and West, decolonization, the Suez crisis, the Hungarian uprising, the war in Algeria, the struggle over Berlin and so on. At this point, one might wonder whether the EEC and EURATOM actually played an important role in the political agenda of the leaders of the countries that were most affected by the integration process – not just the ‘Six’, but also Britain and the United States. Once again taking for granted the same ideals underlying the creation of the ‘united Europe’, the Treaty of Rome was the result of a compromise between national interests, as well as the intuition that the ‘re-launching of Europe’ would serve as a useful tool, enabling the European partners to deal with certain important changes in the international environment. It is true that the positive outcome of the negotiations was primarily determined by a political agreement between Paris and Bonn brokered in the aftermath of the Suez crisis: in the EEC, France saw a means of consolidating its international role through collaboration with the Federal Republic of Germany after the disappointments of the American ‘betrayal’ and British ‘cowardice’ in Suez; Adenauer’s Germany perceived it as confirming the country’s ‘status’ as a European power and as a kind of counter-insurance against possible changes in the US position on the issue of German reunification. As a consequence of this agreement, there was an economic ‘trade-off’: France gave up its traditional protectionism by accepting the creation of a larger market for the revitalized German industry of the Wirtschaftswunder era, and, for its part, the Federal Republic agreed to financially support the modernization of French agriculture and exports. Moreover, Bonn consented to
help Paris through the Association policy, with its aim of developing sub-Saharan Africa under French rule. Finally, the German industrialists and the German economy minister Erhardt agreed to the creation of a Community that would be based on the concept of free trade within its borders, but would tend to be protectionist towards the outside world (on the Treaty of Rome, see Serra 1989; Bossuat 1996; Knipping 2004; Ballini 2010). In fact, this compromise disappointed some of the hopes of the Benelux countries, which (especially in the initial phase of the negotiations) had advocated the establishment of an economic Community open to the outside. As for Italy, despite the standard underestimation of its role by the historiography on integration, the authorities in Rome cleverly managed to obtain its goal of a Community that would contribute to the economic development of the country, especially Southern Italy, and to the resolution of certain fundamental social problems – hence the support for the recognition of a European social policy, a European regional policy, the commitment to the creation of the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Investment Bank (EIB), and, ‘last but not least’, the recognition of the ‘free movement of labour’. This had been one of Italy’s main objectives for the European model since the late 1940s, and with the Treaty of Rome it finally secured the reopening of European labour markets to Italian emigration (Varsori 2010a: 119–58). With regard to the establishment of EURATOM, especially in view of the events that were radically changing the Middle East, the ‘Six’ saw an opportunity in this new Community for the exploitation of an energy source that would enable them to devise a development policy that would be less dependent on the will and the whims of oil-producing nations.

The US did not fail to understand the dangers inherent in the establishment of a Community with protectionist tendencies: the creation of a regional economic approach was in contradiction to the US globalist view, but the great American industries (such as the automotive industry) had already installed themselves in Europe and were producing locally. In Washington, there was a prevailing belief that there would be a significant political advantage in a closer Western European system, especially if it resulted in countries governed by moderate leaders who were strictly loyal to the Atlantic Alliance. The Eisenhower administration’s open support of EURATOM is proof of the United States’ interest in exerting a direct influence on the development of European ‘know-how’ in a sector perceived as sensitive due to its military implications (Varsori 2010b). As for Britain, after its initial scepticism about the ability of its partners to ‘re-launch Europe’, it came to understand how dangerous the economic implications of the EEC would be for London: it would in fact create a powerful economic entity that would be closed to London and in which West Germany would play a central role. London reacted to this danger by trying to establish a wider free trade area within the framework of the OEEC, but these attempts only resulted in the far less effective European Free Trade Area (EFTA) formed by the countries ‘peripheral’ to Western Europe, an experiment whose limits were quickly demonstrated (on Britain’s foreign policy in this period, see Kaiser 1996; Ludlow 1997).

The decade following the entry into force of the Treaty of Rome is seen by many historians as predominantly characterized by the negative presence of General de Gaulle, who, influenced by his ambitions of ‘grandeur’, sought to frustrate any attempt at achieving progress in political integration, as well as any enlargement of the Community (particularly with regard to Britain). Although I do not seek to deny the reality of the French ‘veto’ of Britain’s application for membership (submitted in the summer of 1961), the failure of the Fouchet Plan or the significance of the ‘empty chair crisis’, it should first be noted that in economic terms the EEC proved to be a complete success. Or rather, it would be better to speak of the success of the only two policies that were efficiently expressed and led to relevant achievements: the creation
of a customs union for goods and the gradual establishment of a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (see Patel 2008). The economic growth of the ‘Six’ – these years represented the peak of the so-called ‘Golden Age’ – was largely due to the European system and the creation of an enormous market of nearly 200 million consumers. Obviously, this tumultuous growth, with all its social implications, was also the result of other concomitant factors, both domestic and international, but the ‘European construction’ was an essential tool in this regard. It was recognized as such by the political and economic elites of the ‘Six’, who, putting aside the rhetoric of political integration, adapted themselves to the will of de Gaulle but without questioning the material advantages offered by the construction of an integrated market (on the construction of Europe in this period, see Deighton and Milward 1999; Loth 2001; Ludlow 2006; the volume by Ludlow is of particular importance for its new interpretations). The Luxembourg ‘compromise’ was a victory, not only for France but for each of the ‘Six’, who accepted the primacy of the intergovernmental approach over the supranational ideal represented by the policy pursued by the Hallstein Commission. Between the 1950s and the late 1960s, Community policy became an important part of the foreign policy of the ‘Six’, indirectly influencing the positions of other Western European nations and the US as well (Palayret et al. 2006). Nevertheless, once again, we could ask whether public opinion, political parties and governments themselves regarded the Community choices as central to their foreign policies. If we exclude brief periods related to the best-known episodes concerning ‘Little Europe’, the Cold War and decolonization remained the fundamental reference points for what is termed ‘high politics’ in the international arena. During this decade, with the exception of Gaullist France, the members of the Community confirmed their alignment to the positions of the United States and their loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance, although there were cautious overtures and more or less explicit forms of dialogue with and signs of openness towards the Communist Bloc. The construction of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis, détente, African decolonization and later the Vietnam War were the themes that caught the attention of Western European public opinion and were a source of concern for leaders and political forces (on this period, see Judt 2005: 241–59; for Europe in the international context, see Loth and Soutou 2008). Nevertheless, between Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, a complex European bureaucracy was formed, largely based on European ideals that not only justified the functions it performed, but also attributed to the same bureaucracy and the conduct of its business an ideal political value of great relevance and with strong implications for the future (Dumoulin 2007).

The turning point of the 1970s: a different European integration?

The most recent historiography of post-war Europe underlines the 1970s as a crucial moment of change in the history of the continent, also as a result of radical developments in the wider global context (Ferguson et al. 2010; Varsori and Migani 2010; Baroncelli et al. 2012). It is obvious that this decade – actually, beginning in 1968 – was characterized by major upheavals in Europe, primarily of a social and political nature: the movement of 1968 was a clear expression of a change in values, ways of life and behaviours that marked the entrance into a new world, into ‘our modernity’, as the French historian Chassaigne has argued (Chassaigne 2008). With regard to the political context, in the late 1960s there was a change in leadership in several major European countries that in some way also represented a generational change – just think of the arrival of Georges Pompidou in the Élysée and the appointment of Willy Brandt as Chancellor of Germany (Moeccki 2008). There was also a clear shift to the left among substantial segments of the electorate, and numerous themes and ideas of the radical youth movements ultimately influenced the moderate leadership that was forced to deal with these new trends in
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public opinion. From the international perspective, the Vietnam War and the positions of the Nixon administration made transatlantic relations more difficult and complex, for a long time thereafter sullying the image of the United States, which had lost its standing as the ‘moral’ leader of the West (Gilbert 2007: 45–64). The ‘Third World’ ideology gained momentum in broad sectors of public opinion in Western Europe; moreover, for a certain period countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America seemed to be able to reverse the balance of power that until then had favoured the Western industrialized world. This latter aspect was also partly the result of the oil crisis of 1973–4, which triggered a phase of economic hardship that lasted for a decade. Western Europe was faced with the collapse of its illusion of unlimited growth, and for some time many gave credence to the theory of the irreversible decline of the capitalist system (Garavini 2012).

European integration (or rather, Community leaders and the EEC) was impacted by these radical changes. The process of integration was interpreted as the tool that would enable these actors to deal more effectively with the new problems and changes facing the continent. The Hague Summit Conference of December 1969, with its objectives of ‘enlargement’, ‘completion’ and ‘deepening’, was the first expression of this new ‘integration’ (Guasconi 2004; Bussière et al. 2006; Wirsching and Lazar 2011). First, the significance of the inclusion of three new countries – Britain, Ireland and Denmark – cannot be limited to mere economic aspects or the end of the Gaullist ‘veto’; English and Danish accession marked the end of the concept of ‘Catholic Europe’, although this change had already begun a few years earlier with the transformation experienced by the Church following the Second Vatican Council. The ‘Eurocentric’ views of Pius XII had become anachronistic; Catholicism was turning its attention to Africa and Latin America, and some factions were propounding Third World theories and ideals. In addition, the shift towards the left of the political spectrum favoured the rise of ‘Socialist’ values and ‘progressive’ catchwords in all political circles in Europe, even in the leadership of the member states and in the European institutions themselves, in particular the Parliament and the Commission. Although ‘completion’ resulted in the creation of a Community budget and the strengthening of the CAP, it was primarily in European ‘deepening’ that the transformations of a general nature were to have their greatest impact. During the first half of the 1970s, the Community launched a series of new policies, ranging from regional policy to environmental policy to energy policy. Also significant during this era was the strengthening and partial transformation of social policy, which was in part influenced by the spirit of and the problems posed by the ‘1968’ movement (Scichilone 2008; Di Sarcina 2010; Varsori 2010b: 235–70). Nor is it possible to ignore the innovations that were included in the Lomé Conventions of 1975, some of which seemed to inspire new and more egalitarian criteria for the Community’s relations with the countries of the Third World (Migani 2011). In the context of transatlantic relations, the European Community seemed to indicate a more independent European path with respect to the American alliance, although this involved contradictions and second thoughts. The first attempt at creating a European monetary system – the so-called ‘snake in the tunnel’ – arose from divergent interests between Washington and the Community in the field of monetary policy (Mourlon-Druol 2012). Despite the lack of successful outcomes, European attempts to initiate a dialogue with the Arab world and the growing attention directed towards the Mediterranean were also of great relevance. In this context, the Copenhagen declaration on the political ‘identity’ of the European Community and the establishment of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) should be noted (Varsori 2010b; Migani 2011); the latter found concrete expression in particular in the management of the negotiations of the Helsinki Agreements of 1975, even though the EPC reflected an intergovernmental cooperation that extended beyond the boundaries of the EEC.
In fact, although this ‘new’ European construction maintained much of its character over the course of the decade, 1974 marked a further change, largely due to the appearance of two new leaders in France and the Federal Republic of Germany (Valery Giscard d’Estaing and Helmut Schmidt, respectively), as well as the further evolution of the international context. Even though the changes that have been noted appeared to have strengthened the Community as a whole (with the exception of the EPC, which remained intergovernmental in nature), the French President and the German Chancellor seemed to consider the Community to be merely an instrument of a renewed Franco-German collaboration whose strategies and objectives often were situated outside the Community context (Romano 2008). Although it has been claimed that the Helsinki Accords marked the apex of détente, in fact at that time the leadership of the major Western countries began to worry about the possibility that détente was advantageous only to the USSR and that part of the Third World that was hostile to the West. Moreover, elements of crisis and instability involving possible moves towards resolutions that could favour the radical left and/or neutralists manifested themselves even on the continent of Europe – from Portugal to Greece, Spain and Italy. Furthermore, the situation remained critical for the capitalist system and the United States, which (especially after the Watergate scandal) did not appear capable of exerting a clear leadership role in the Western world. Consequently, Giscard and Schmidt used the Community as a means of stabilizing the wave of crisis washing over Southern Europe by strengthening the Community’s image as a model of Western democracy more effective than that of the United States, a reconciliation between capitalism and the welfare state. This system was received favourably by those in Greece, Spain and Portugal who, while not desiring a return to the authoritarian regimes of the right, had no intention of replacing dictators with authoritarian regimes of the radical left (Del Pero et al. 2010). With regard to economic aspects, Giscard and Schmidt were the proponents of the establishment of what would become the G7: an attempt to coordinate the efforts of the major industrialized countries, including the United States, in addressing the global economic crisis. Finally, in 1978, France and Germany, in the face of the apparent ineptitude of the Carter administration, re-launched a more effective project for the establishment of a European Monetary System (EMS). This shared vision, however, did not prevent Schmidt from urging the US to address the threat of the Soviet SS-20 missiles, demonstrating that the Atlantic Alliance still appeared to be the most effective tool in the context of a resurgent Cold War.

At the end of the 1970s, the first elections to the European Parliament (EP) with direct universal suffrage were held. Although the consultations had indicated the prevalence of national issues, the EP that emerged in 1979 was perhaps most sensitive to issues of political integration, not only due to the presence of Altiero Spinelli, but also owing to the belief of many European MPs that they were the custodians of a real mandate for change towards a federal Community (on European elections, see the recent contribution by Pasquinucci 2013). These aspirations, however, were largely frustrated. We might indeed wonder about the degree of public interest in the Community during a phase in which much attention was focused on the emergence of new and serious tensions between East and West in Europe, from the Euro-missiles to the Polish crisis, let alone the development of a further serious energy crisis.

The 1980s: from apparent stalemate to the success of Maastricht

Between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, European integration experienced a phase of stagnation. This is proof of how the events related to the Community were – and still are – profoundly influenced by both domestic factors and developments in the wider international system. The period between 1979 and 1982 witnessed radical changes in political leadership in
Britain, France, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy. In London in 1979, the return to power of the Conservatives was marked by the arrival of Margaret Thatcher in Downing Street with her ‘conservative revolution’, which was, however, only fully to unfold after the British victory in the Falklands War of 1982. In Paris in 1981, for the first time, a socialist president was elected to the Elysée as the head of a coalition of the left, including the PCF, ushering in a brief period of increased state intervention in the economy. In Bonn in 1982, the long period of domination by the SPD came to an end with the return to the Chancellery of the leader of the CDU/CSU, Helmut Kohl. Finally, Italy seemed to emerge from the long crisis of the 1970s with the establishment of the five-party coalition (pentapartito), an alliance between parties that would lead the country for the next decade (on the changes in these four countries, see Favier and Martin-Roland 1990; Padgett 1994; Vinen 2009; Gervasoni 2010). In addition to these significant developments within Western Europe, the EEC was confronted with a series of major changes in the foreign policy context and in the field of international economic relations. With regard to the former, a new open conflict between East and West was set off; due to the controversial issue of the Euro-missiles, the confrontation between Washington and Moscow was again focused on Europe (Nuti 2009). During the Reagan administration, the United States managed to once again take over leadership of the West, not only in terms of politico-military force, but also on the basis of the country’s renewed ability to serve as an economic and social model and to export its increasingly globalized popular culture. With respect to economic developments, the apparent success of ‘neo-liberalism’ was the result of both the changing climate concerning the future of capitalism and the changes brought about by technological developments in the economy and the growing weight of finance in comparison to industry. This trend included the move towards a ‘post-Fordist’ society and the emergence of new actors on the economic scene, from the so-called ‘Asian tigers’ (Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea) to the strengthening of the Japanese economy and the early signs of real openness towards the market system by the People’s Republic of China. These developments entailed only a minor role for the Third World countries, whose needs found their last expression in the conference held in Cancun in 1981; notably, even the developing countries very quickly lost faith in the planned economy model propounded by the USSR. The member states of the European Community, in addition to undergoing experimentation and breaks in their domestic leadership, seemed to react particularly strongly to the political and military challenges posed by the new Cold War. Although in different ways (in comparison to the late 1940s), again this reaction resulted in a realignment towards the US position, with the acceptance of the installation of medium-range missiles within their borders. Even Mitterrand, despite the presence in the government of the PCF and harsh critics of all other aspects of the Reagan administration, ended up supporting Washington rather than Moscow on strategic issues (Favier and Martin-Roland 1991: 29–54; Bozo 2005: 29–54). All this was valid in a short-term perspective, but not in the medium or long term without incurring the nullification of any European autonomy in the clash between East and West. In addition to the dynamics of the new Cold War, the member states had to take into consideration and address the changes taking place in the economic context, as well as those in technological and social fields, in order to safeguard the leading role in the world economy that they had won back in the 1960s and 1970s. To this end, it was necessary to resolve the anomaly represented by Mitterrand’s France, which between 1981 and 1983 seemed to have taken a path diverging from the advancing ‘neo-liberalism’. However, in 1983, confronted with the country’s serious and growing economic difficulties and under pressure from his own finance minister, Jacques Delors, Mitterrand decided to make a U-turn in the French economy; this decision had as its corollary the expulsion of the PCF from the governing majority and rapprochement with West Germany (Berstein et al. 2001). It is no coincidence that
these changes marked Mitterrand’s decision to ensure that the European system would return to being one of the primary goals of French foreign policy. Paris and Bonn, having rediscovered their commitment to Europe, were forced to resolve the problem posed by Britain’s request for a change in the EEC budget in favour of London. This obstacle was overcome on the occasion of the European Council held at Fontainebleau in 1984. Moreover, in this same period, thanks to the actions of Spinelli and the approval of his project for a European Union by the European Parliament in Strasbourg, some European political elites appeared to rediscover a sense of the Community as an international actor in a polarized world that appeared to be shaped by the clash between the USSR and the United States. European integration was therefore re-proposed as a response to the major international problems that were manifesting themselves and the radical changes that were ushering in the world economy. In this context, it was necessary to identify the path to be pursued in relation to this new opportunity offered to Europe on the basis of the ‘integration’ process. The paths to be followed and the goals to be achieved were elaborated, not without uncertainties and difficulties, around the middle of the decade. As in the early 1950s, it was assumed that adaptation to the international economic system was the most important objective, as well as the most easily attainable, not only because it would be managed by the politico-diplomatic and technocratic-administrative Europeanist elites, but also because if it was successful these aims would be readily (and almost automatically) accepted by European public opinion (Varsori 2013a). The first expression of this strategy was the ‘White Paper’ of the Delors Commission, which envisaged the creation of a single European market based on the free movement of goods, capital, services and people. This goal represented the apparent conversion to a ‘neo-liberal’ approach on the part of personalities whose backgrounds and experiences were not at all ‘neo-liberal’ (such as Mitterrand and Delors, two committed Socialists, and Chancellor Kohl, a Christian Democrat). It is not surprising that the ‘White Paper’ was largely the work of the British Commissioner Lord Cockfield or that Margaret Thatcher did not seem hostile to the objectives set out by the Commission (Varsori 2010a). In this context, the French ‘Eureka’ project in the technology sector should also be noted, as it was perceived as a means for Europe to counter the growing American supremacy in this field. For its part, Italy, repeating a frequent script, pointed out the need for greater political integration; in this way, Rome hoped to safeguard the interests of Italy as a ‘junior partner’ (as it was perceived to be by the other leaders of the Community) (Varsori 2010a: 331–4). Beyond these goals, the first concrete step was the reform of the ‘tools’ at the disposal of the Community. This need was expressed in the Single European Act, which granted greater power to the Commission; this institution became the driving force in this era of change, above all in the implementation of the ‘single market’. The economic impetus of the European Community was the preparation for the challenges of incipient globalization, as well as a renewed détente – between 1985 and 1989, this was the vision in the West of what was happening in the East thanks to the actions of Gorbachev – but the question of the political character of the new European construction was still left open. In this context, Delors, Mitterrand, Kohl and other European leaders demonstrated their conviction that greater political integration (always driven by elites) would allow them to preserve the basic character of the European Community, in particular the ability to reconcile neo-liberalism and the welfare state. Perhaps they did not realize that the choices made in the economic sphere were progressively removing one of the aspects upon which the Community had been founded; that is, its identity as a regional economic area. In the short term, however, global events seemed to ease the decisions taken by both the leaders of the member states and the Commission. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War fostered a further significant acceleration of the integration process: The building of Europe seemed to offer the most effective tool to deal with
the rebirth of a strong German state in the centre of the continent, as well as the prospect of the merger of the two halves of Europe after more than 40 years of division (that many had believed destined to last much longer). The prospect of the ‘big market’ – or rather, the achievement of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) with its ambitious ultimate goal of creating a single currency, which in 1988 still seemed like a utopian dream – was accompanied by the design of stronger political integration with the establishment of the European Union (EU), potentially the embryo of a federal state. A relatively brief negotiation process led to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, which, although complex, was founded on certain specific assumptions: the partners of Germany, in particular France and Italy, accepted its reunification but asked Kohl for greater political and economic integration. Specifically, Bonn would have to give up the Deutschmark, the symbol of West Germany’s strength and its rebirth from the ashes of Nazism, in favour of a single currency, the euro (Padoa-Schioppa 2004). However, West German leaders won the concession that the future European currency would be inspired by the Deutschmark and that Bonn’s partners would agree to comply with the precepts of economic policy that for decades had been the basis of decisions by the Bundesbank: rigour in public accounting, a firm hand controlling inflation and the exclusion from the EMU of those who were unable to comply with these rules through the five ‘benchmarks’ (a criterion that later concerned Italy in particular) (Dyson and Featherstone 1999; Geary et al. 2013; Varsori 2013b). In the euphoria and optimism resulting from the conclusion of the Cold War, European leaders believed that the EU could play a central role in international relations and could create tools to foster the process of homogenization of the social and political models of its members. There were, of course, certain ‘grey areas’ in this ambitious project: Britain’s ‘opting out’ from the social chapter, the intergovernmental character of the two outer pillars – the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) – but the important decision on the EMU cannot be overlooked; as in the past, an economic instrument, largely created and run by technocratic elites, successfully functioned as a catalyst for political integration based on the actions of a bureaucratic Europeanist elite. At that time, the European project peaked in terms of prestige and the confidence expressed both by governments and by public opinion. The creation of the EU seemed to represent the realization of the European dream, but also a fundamental step towards the emergence of a united Europe.

From illusions to disenchantment to the crisis

Although it is not easy for a historian to confront the last 20 years of European integration and propose an interpretation, it would be appropriate, in a cautious fashion, to offer a brief assessment of the period after the creation of the EU.

During the 1990s, there was no lack of signs of difficulty in the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty and the realization of some of the most ambitious goals laid out therein. In particular, the management of German reunification was more difficult and complex than expected, and the CFSP inability to deal with the crisis in the former Yugoslavia quickly revealed its limitations (for events related to the Yugoslavia crisis, see Pirjevec 2001; Schwabe 2004; on the EU policy pursued in the Balkans, see Gori 2007); in addition, the applications for membership by nations that had been part of the Communist Bloc were met with a very conservative and cautious response in Brussels, although the EU quickly expanded from 12 to 15 members with the accession of three neutral states (Austria, Sweden and Finland). Nevertheless, these years were characterized by a basically positive attitude towards European integration, in part as a result of the commitment of the pro-European elite (in particular the Brussels bureaucracy) to establishing the EU as a model of political, social and economic success.
and facilitating the proliferation of the symbols and values employed to justify a European identity, such as the flag with the 12 stars and the European anthem (Léger 1995). Certain EU programmes began to affect the daily lives of millions of citizens in the EU countries, contributing to the popular belief in an implicit form of ‘European citizenship’; the most obvious example in this context is the Erasmus program (Paoli 2011). In this same period, the structuring of the EU, its increasing set of tasks and its ‘propaganda’ favoured the emergence of a committed pro-European ‘small world’. To the traditional bureaucracy of Brussels were added the numerous and influential ‘lobbies’ emerging in the context of the structural funds, a European Parliament finally exercising decision-making powers and a jumble of journalists, intellectuals, academics and national and local politicians, all disciples of the ‘word’ of Brussels, in an almost ‘neo-Enlightenment’ and at times ‘messianic’ mood, spreading the image of a world founded on progressive, universal and democratic values in which the EU would stand out as a symbol of democracy and respect for and dissemination of human rights, in combination with capitalist prosperity tempered by a definite and traditional social sensitivity (Meyer 2008). On the economic level, the spread of the belief in the EU’s ability to advance and modernize its more backward members through the ‘success stories’ of Spain, Ireland and (to a lesser extent) Portugal and Greece should not be neglected, nor should the case of Prodi’s Italy, which was ‘resurrected’ after the country’s economic and political crisis of 1992–3, thanks in large part to Europe. At the same time, the EU increasingly accepted its inclusion in a globalized economy, gradually dismantling most of the features of a regional economic area, with the partial exception of the CAP – perhaps not realizing that the process of economic globalization would place the EU in competition with emerging nations far more homogeneous and with greater leadership skills than a Union in which the intergovernmental machinery, with its endless and complex mediations, was strengthened at the expense of the Commission.

It has been argued that the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on 11 September 2001 represented a fundamental break in international relations. It is certain that these events were perceived in Europe as a turning point, a sort of dramatic awakening from the illusion of the post-Cold War international world order characterized by the presence of one superpower, the United States, benevolent and not very interested in Europe (except where the fate of the Russian Federation was concerned). The EU (or rather, some of its major states) responded to these events with a further acceleration in the integration process. The EU returned to the enlargement issue with the idea of a ‘big bang’, i.e. the prospect of the rapid inclusion between 2004 and 2007 of 12 new EU members, in the belief that this move would help to stabilize the European continent. This decision was certainly influenced by both the failure of the European Union in Kosovo and the concerns over the rapid decline of the Boris Yeltsin administration in Russia, as well as the fact that the EU had no wish to be outdone by the United States (which had favoured the rapid accession of several countries of the former Warsaw Pact into NATO) (Mattina 2004; Bossuat and Deighton 2007; Wassenberg et al. 2010; Arcidiacono 2012; Varsori 2013c: 377–88). In 2001, the new currency, the euro, was introduced, clearly an important symbol of a possible European identity. The leaders of the member states and the European elites also pointed to the creation of a treaty that would establish a European constitutional scheme; this treaty, beyond the aspects of the decision-making process, seemed to be primarily inspired by the criteria of international justice and universal rights, as if these ideals were the heritage of the EU alone and not of all liberal democracies worldwide. The elaboration of the treaty and its signature took place contemporaneously with a major crisis in transatlantic relations, resulting from differences between some of the major European countries (notably France and Germany) and the US over the ‘war on terror’ and the military campaign against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The clash with the Bush
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administration, to which there was a general and open hostility across Europe, was interpreted by most pro-European elites (as well as several American pundits and scholars) as an opportunity for the EU to assert a distinct identity in opposition to the United States. It was thought that a new international player within the Western world, described in some cases as a ‘European power’, in others as a ‘civilian power’ (Telò 2004; Varsori 2011), might be on the point of emerging. Especially the latter concept strengthened the idea of a European Union that would be the standard-bearer of a vision of international relations administered by international law, the guardian of human rights and peace, open to dialogue and a ‘multicultural’ approach, whose motto would become the optimistic – and vague – ‘unity in diversity’. Moreover, this approach allowed the reconciliation of an EU based primarily on the relationship between states (but with integrationist aspirations) with the defence – even the exaltation – of regional realities.

In fact, certain signals should have led to an understanding of how these ‘leaps forward’ might imply obvious contradictions and obstacles. First and foremost, this involved the reactions of those segments (in some cases, the majority) of national populations that were not convinced by or did not understand the positive aspects of European integration and that (rightly or wrongly) seemed to be afraid of or viewed in a negative light the consequences of the decisions taken in Brussels: the influence of the euro on the cost of living, the opening of national borders to uncontrolled immigration from the East (the well-known but phantom ‘Polish plumbers’) and the moralistic intolerance of the ‘propaganda’ from Brussels that sought to demonize any criticism of the EU as ‘Euroscepticism’ and a symptom of outdated ‘conservatism’. The first consequences of this progressive gap between public opinion and EU opinion-leaders and political leadership were the outcomes of two referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005 that led to the failure of the Constitutional Treaty. Moreover, the persistent trend of considering the United States as an adversary seemed to obscure the consideration that the EU was primarily an economic actor, and that, in this context, the fiercest competitor for Europe was not the United States but perhaps the emerging economies, with which (having accepted the logic of a globalized economy) the EU was often forced to compete from a weakened position.

The financial crisis of 2008 and its progressive intensification began to call into question the only assumption upon which the supporters of European integration had always agreed since the 1950s, that which had won popular support for the project: the effectiveness of gradual economic integration as the most useful way to strengthen the economies of Europe or to defend them in the case of economic crisis. Setting aside the ambitions of the EU as a political and social model that nations worldwide should aspire to emulate, its value as an economic model was now cast into doubt: the ‘success stories’ of the 1990s and early 2000s, from Spain to Ireland, were shown to have serious limitations, if not very fragile foundations; the euro came to be seen as a ‘straitjacket’ that prevents the resolution of some member states’ problems but favours the fortunes of others; and the tools of economic regulation seemed to be ineffective or only of service to one nation, Germany (consider the still unresolved debate between policies of ‘rigour’ and economic ‘re-launch’). Moreover, some member states have been inundated with waves of strong Eurosceptic sentiment, in which calls to fight the ‘democratic deficit’ (often used by pro-European elites as a means of resolving the contradictions of the EU) could turn into a boomerang. There are already those who are afraid, perhaps with a little exaggeration, that the next European Parliament will be composed of a majority of Eurosceptic parties and movements.

One might be tempted to pose the question of whether European integration will in the near future become a relic like the Cold War – that is, not a matter of policy, but simply an object of history. In fact, since integration has very often been used as a tool as well as an end in itself – a means by which the European nations have sought to address and resolve their
internal contradictions and international problems, a sort of modern expression of the nineteenth century ‘concert of powers’ – it is in fact likely that European integration will survive the present crisis, perhaps in a different shape or form, perhaps when political leaders become capable of long-term views and give up the idea that a set of 28 countries can act on the basis of substantial unanimity of purpose and policy. But here the task of a historian is at an end.

Notes

1 This is an updated translation of an article published in Italian: Varsori, Antonio (2013), ‘Per una interpretazione storica del processo di integrazione europea’. Ventunesimo Secolo 12(3).
2 The singular role played by Catholic values in the European construction has been investigated in a limited way, for example by Chenaux (1990) and Canavero and Durand (1998).
3 See Dumoulin (1995) and Heide (2010). The focus on this project phase was already evident in the initial period of historical studies on European integration. An ambitious collection of documents in this area was initiated, resulting in the publication of four important books (Lipgens 1985–91). The last two volumes were actually edited by Wilfried Loth after the illness and death of Lipgens.
4 See Milward (1984). We do not focus on the important role played by Milward, who offers a provocative and significant interpretation of the origins and character of European integration. In particular, see Milward (1992).
5 On the interpretation of the construction of Europe as the basis of American influence in Europe, see Lundestad (1998).
6 It is not possible to explore in detail the long and complex discussion on the process of ‘Americanization’ in this context; cf. the recent contribution by Ellwood (2012).
7 This basically explains how there can be well-known and important histories of post-war Europe, especially in the English language, within which the space devoted to European integration is often minimal; cf., for example, the well-known book by Judt (2005).
8 Significant in this regard is the story of the Dutch Sicco Mansholt, a Socialist politician, European Commissioner for Agriculture and for a brief time President of the Commission; see van Merrienboer (2011).

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