

EUROPEAN UNION

A POLITY IN SEARCH OF A MISSION?

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Abstract

The unique features of the European Union generate permanent political and theoretical debates; the fact is unsurprising, since simply describing this entity is a challenge. Despite the impressive literature on the topic, there is no widely recognized understanding of EU's nature as a polity. The paper considers that the most appropriate term from the usual political vocabulary to designate it is that of 'empire'. EU is based on an imperial myth, comprises many former imperial powers, can be considered an empire, but does not display the behaviour and ideology expected from one. The article suggests that the answer for this dissonance can be found in considering that the defining feature of a given empire is its 'mission' – the ideological project that legitimizes and guides it. From the theoretical position of social constructivism, the paper investigates the characteristics of EU's mission as an innovative polity.

Keywords: EU, polity, empire, mission, social constructivism

1. Introduction

The unique double nature of the European Union – an international organization and/or a supranational institution – is a major political innovation and a source of permanent controversies, as well. From a theoretical perspective, the issue can be found in the core of the debates raised by EU's institutions and processes, such as the one between the rational-instrumentalist and social-cultural approaches, between intergovernmentalism and (neo)functionalism, or about the epistemological statuses and advantages of the 'middle range' specific theories, etc.

On political and theoretical ground, discussing this 'unidentified political object', as Jacques Delors characterized EU [1] seems to be both difficult and productive. In spite of all differences among positions, I think that it is reasonable to consider EU an entity, at least as long as nowadays expressions such as 'the EU does this or that/the EU's policy is...', etc. are so commonly used in all kinds of discourses. As a supporter of the constructivist approach, I

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consider that any social entity has to offer an answer to the question “who/ what am I?”, in other words, to address the problem of identity [2].

There are two main possible starting points for answering the above question, which have to do with privileging one dimension in front of the other in dealing with EU’s dual nature. Briefly, one can consider EU either a very tight connected international organization, or a (unfinished/to-be-more integrated) supra-national polity. There are well-known good arguments for supporting both positions, and I do not intend to repeat them here. I only suggest that the former option can prove useful in particular for those issues concerning the intra-union relations, as long as an international organization is designed to address the problems among political units. John Ruggie uses the term of ‘multilateralism’ for expressing the idea, and distinguishes it from bilateralism and imperialism. Ruggie defines multilateralism as “an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of «generalized» principles of conduct – that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence” [3]. No matter what it has to offer in its main logic, this perspective does not seem to be the most promising in dealing with EU’s identity, and the fact is even more obvious when comparing with the other one. Therefore, I consider in this paper only the second point of view.

Following the constructivist premises, the Self is continuously defined in contact with the Other, and thus subject to change. The argument of the paper is based on three major consequences of these assumptions. Firstly, that the EU, as any other actor, has not and cannot have a definitive identity. The point is even more obvious if one regards the entity taken into consideration as (still?) a very young one, lacking a social agreement on this issue (and the already mentioned debates are a strong argument in this direction). Secondly, that the most suitable place to study the EU’s identity formation and definition is by looking at its external contacts – where the Other can be found. Thirdly, that the study of the identity implies a certain conception of the Self as it is and as it would like to be. The paper tries to investigate if and how this self-definition, both actual and potential, is an appropriate way for the study of the European Union.

In the spirit of constructivism, the idealist factors have to be taken into consideration in the approach of the social phenomena. My premise is that the importance of the ideological ingredient is greater in the case of EU than for other polities, due to two of its features. The first of these characteristics is its supra-national nature (by comprising already well-defined polities); the second one is visible in the permanent debates regarding its future, to which an answer has to be given, one way or another (the constant possibility/risk of disintegration, the energy involved in discussing it, and so on). For the above reasons, I therefore focus the attention on what I call the ‘mission’ of the European Union, which I intend to discuss in the paper.

As for the structure of the argument, at first I try to identify the most appropriate concept for designating the European Union, from a known and limited taxonomy. I dedicate the next section to the discussion of the nature of EU as a polity, and in the third part I address the problem of defining EU's mission. The final section intends to offer a synthetic perspective on the main arguments of the paper and some of their consequences.

2. Choosing the appropriate term

The political vocabulary designating the polities is a limited one. To put it straight, for the last several centuries of European experience, there are only two terms in use that make reference of a polity of a certain dimension (mainly due to their sizes, I let aside the city-states like those common in Italian and German Middle Age): the state and the empire. In brief, it is the position of this paper that, for the time being at least, we can refer, politically and intellectually, to the European Union either in the terms of a (future) state or in those of an empire. It is quite plausible that the EU will eventually evolve in neither of them, but I consider that the main role of the concepts is to make intelligible the social reality. In other words, using one term or another in order to describe the EU is a matter of choice, but from a limited range at one's disposal.

First, let us consider the implications of referring at the European Union as to a state – even as a potentiality, or a political ideal, and so on. It is quite simple to reject such an option on the very criterion of a state, the famous Weberian one: it is obvious that there is no pretension, no political plan, not even an idea of considering an EU monopoly over the legitimate use of force on its territory. Politically, the French and Dutch rejections by referendum in 2005 of the Treaty envisaging an increased integration of the member states (a treaty considered as a first and necessary step toward the formation of a future single European state) have discarded such a possibility at least for the years or decades to come.

The above considerations are well known and quite common, and sufficient by themselves. While trying to formulate a position in this paper, I would like to present a different argument in supporting the same idea – that taking into account the possibility of the EU as a (future) state is a misleading one in an ideological and teleological discussion, so to say in terms of the 'mission'.

In my view, a state does not need what can be called a 'mission', but a desire, largely shared by the elites/ people who live inside its borders, to survive as an entity. A state is, above all, an enterprise of delimitating a polity from others, similar in nature, and its efforts to continue or not to exist in the known constitutional framework. Even if one considers this as a very narrow understanding of the state (and I agree with such an observation), on the other hand, it is a common place to say that no important theoretical position in this matter can exclude the surviving imperative from state definition.

The ideology of the state is, of course, subject to change throughout time and space, and the European experiences and idiosyncrasies are now at the very basis of the political organization of the entire world. The idea of separating the religious and political realms, or that of a political body, both supporting and being represented by the state (the *nation*) are among the most important ideological contribution made by the European thinking in the field. The European wars in modern times (from the religious ones in the 16th and 17th centuries to the global confrontations of the 20th) provided, as extreme situations, the necessary incentives in considering the practical motivations and implications of the European experience.

The European intellectual and political experience framed the even concept of ‘state’, now worldwide understood as such, and the state has the surviving imperative at its core. The pretension and doctrine of ‘sovereignty’ encapsulates the political and juridical expression of this desire. “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” [4]. However, extreme could nowadays seems to be, this famous, formidable, breath-taking definition given by Carl Schmitt is a formula for considering sovereignty in terms of the supremacy of a decision-centre over any limitation. It is a claim of supreme power to chart the unknown normative space when requisite, to give an institutional response to an ontological challenge. This self-assumed right is the ultimate weapon that the state can use to unbind itself from its own constraints when it considers necessary – for instance, when its very existence is at stake. A state can decide that it is ready to abandon any possible restriction in order to survive; or it can decide to ‘commit suicide’ and dissolve or became part of another state, or to share/delegate a part of its own sovereignty with/ to other political entities, etc. All these are examples of exceptional decisions that can be made by a sovereign and by it only.

It is obvious that the European Union, as a political reality or still as a project, is not even close to the above definition on sovereignty, and that such an ultimate power rests on the member states. The role assigned to supra-/transnational EU institution such as the Commission is of a ‘guardian of the treaties’ – and that definitely does not mean the capacity of ruling over the exceptions. The European Parliament does not embody the *sovereign* will of the European people, and simply cannot decide what an exception is, and so on. More, I do not think that there is anyone – however enthusiastic about the transformation of the EU in something similar to a state – that could consider such a possibility as reasonably feasible, at least not for the predictable future.

In my opinion, the fact that the EU as a whole lacks any mechanism of ensuring a state of exception is the best way to demonstrate that the EU is not a sovereign polity and this means that it is not about surviving. If it is not about surviving, EU is not following the state-like logic, so that this observation leaves us with the possibility of referring to it as to an empire. By consequence, the next question is ‘what is an empire?’.

3. Defining an empire

However different in time and space, the states share at least one characteristic – the desire to survive; their claims of sovereignty make them appeal to a certain instrument – the monopoly on the legitimate use of the violence on their territory. Defining an empire is a much trickier job: there are significant fewer empires than states in the modern world, so that the group of empires is by far less homogenous than that of states. Unlike the states, which can be regarded, at least for the purposes of this paper, as a product of the modern age, the empires are not – somehow, an unhistorical perspective is involved in any discussion about them, maybe even because they are considered obsolete in the nation-state era.

Anyone who studies the empires has to deal with the above-mentioned constraints, so that we can consider at least two paths - empirical and ideational - in defining them. On one way, Michael Doyle offers us a very simple, minimalist formula for identifying such a polity - “effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinated society by an imperial society” [5]. Intended to be a functionalist description of an empire (‘behavioural’, in Doyle’s own terms), the definition points out to the hierarchical relations between two different societies.

On the other hand, the definition looks to be much too wide, as it can be used to describe virtually any kind of power-relation between societies, regardless of the forms of these relations. I referred somewhere else to the distinction between an ‘empire’ and ‘hegemony’ and I noticed that this is in the terms of sovereignty. However hard the dominance exercised by a hegemonic power over the subordinated societies, the ‘centre’ recognizes the dominated unit’s sovereignty – as Peter Taylor explains, a hegemonic state is a counter-imperial project [6]. An empire, in order to be identified as such, needs institutions that specifically denies or limits the sovereignty of the political unit under its control [7].

At the other end of the definitional spectrum, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri consider a concept of empire in a manner that seems to be borrowed from a medieval ideological construction: “a global concert under the direction of a single conductor, a unitary power that maintains the social peace and produces its ethical truths. And in order to achieve these ends, the single power is given the necessary force to conduct, when necessary, ‘just wars’ at the borders against the barbarians and internally against the rebellious” [8]. The normative foundation of the empire is, for Hardt and Negri, the principle behind its expansionism, so that it “exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order. In other words, Empire presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary.” [8, p. 11]

The description of THE empire given by Hardt and Negri looks more that of a political phantasm than of a social reality. It is obvious that the model the two authors have had in mind is the classical Roman Empire. For more than a millennium, the European minds considered the Roman Empire the ideal polity

on Earth. At its heights, it virtually exhausted the geographical, social, and normative space of the entire known and civilized world; but even then it proved to be a much too harder effort to preserve it. In time, as a source of the ethical truth, it had to share the preeminence with the Christian Church; politically the power had to be divided between East and West, and so on.

Virtually any European imperial enterprise in the centuries to come tried to replicate the classical Roman model. The Eastern heirs of the imperial dream (the most important being Byzantium and Russia) somehow managed to observe it, but the Western line failed from the very beginning in imposing a single source of truth embodied into a unique political and military authority. At the end of the Middle Age, the political actors had to reconsider and re-formulate the ideological arguments, mainly in the West. Well before the Westphalian moment, Pope Alexander VI mediated the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, acted as judge between two Catholic monarchies, Spain (Castile and Aragon) and Portugal, and thus divided the world – a still unknown world. It was the Pope and not the head of the Holy Roman Empire the one who arbitrated the dispute; the Pope was the one who entrusted the two new imperial powers with the Christian mission of spreading the faith. On the other hand, one should note that the imperial realm did not imply an imperial formal quality – no Spanish monarch ever had the title of ‘Emperor of Indies’ or ‘Emperor of America’ [9]. The empires needed time to renounce at the claim of unifying the Universe in the name of the truth, whose depository they were. This renouncement was for sure the legitimate perspective at the eve of the age of imperialism, in the post-Napoleonic Holy Alliance the Russian and the Austrian empires legitimizing each other’s pretension as source of norms in their respective realms.

The definition of the empire given by Hardt and Negri is thus restricted to those polities that are sovereign, and only in certain conditions such as the normative monopoly – but it is not necessarily the case. At least after Westphalia, the doctrine of sovereignty is an argument for surviving in the anarchic world – so that the monopoly of the legitimate use of force on a given territory became compulsory. On the other hand, an empire is, above all, a unifying normative idea. One should also note that this definition is not precise enough: an ‘empire’ should be distinguished from other forms of normative unity of political entities, such as the medieval *res publica christiana*, or the English School’s ‘international society’. Hedley Bull’s famous definition says that “[a] *society of states* (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions“ [10]. The post-imperial/hegemonic structures such as the Commonwealths (even if only *a posteriori* intellectually identified, as the Byzantine one [11], expressing several kinds of relations - the British experiences, or still more a political idea – the Russian one), should also be differentiated from empires. How can one define more precisely an empire?

In my opinion, a starting point in answering this question can be found by following the above-given definitions and the comments made. Doyle's definition of an empire points out to its structure – a hierarchical one; from Hardt and Negri's remains the idea of a common normative space. The combination of the two perspectives lets aside the problems of legitimizing the observance of the common norms in a hierarchical structure. I suggest in this paper that the response is an ideological argument. It is the idea of a 'mission' that bonds together previous existing political entities, legitimizes their subordination to specific institutions, and guides the action of the whole.

4. EU's mission?

In the simple taxonomy suggested by this paper, the modern-times polities can be regarded as belonging to either a state-like family, or to an imperial one. As long as it is not possible, at least for the present time, to integrate EU in the first category, it lets us the possibility of trying to understand EU in the terms of an empire.

It is obvious that it is nothing new in studying EU through the conceptual lenses appropriated for an empire. For instance, Jan Zielonka's *Europe as an Empire* is, in my opinion, a very powerful and detailed demonstration of the idea. Zielonka distinguishes between two different types of empires: a Westphalian model and a neo-medieval one. The major differences are in terms of the importance and hardness of the borders, the internal homogeneity and the structure of authority (strictly hierarchical *vs.* interpenetration of the governance levels and authorities), the structure and roles of the military and police forces, the meanings of sovereignties, etc. [1, p. 11-20]. If an empire, EU does integrate in the second category.

The subtle distinction made by Zielonka is, in my view, appropriate for defining the intellectual framework in approaching EU's architecture. On the other hand, as I shall try to demonstrate, it can be misleading if not adapted to include the idea of dynamism of processes. I therefore think that it is necessary to make some amendments to this perspective, in particular due to the objectives of this paper – to consider a role for an ideological argument (the 'mission') in defining EU's identity. I hope that the following discussion will clarify the idea I support.

To resume, I shall start from the implications of regarding EU in terms of an empire, which requires the understanding of its institutions and processes in imperial constraints and logics. "Like all empires the Union is more preoccupied with maintaining its internal cohesion than in solving external problems on the ground." [1, p. 143] This observation made by Zielonka is, in my interpretation, not meant to express an absolute truth, but a comparative one. In other words, I think that Zielonka makes here a comparison between an empire and a state-like polity. At a first sight, I am rather inclined to agree with it, simply because an empire is, by definition, a much more heterogeneous construction than a

Westphalian entity (and the unity encapsulated in the ‘*nation-state*’ formulae is, I think, suggestive enough for what do I have in mind).

On the other hand, it looks like the above comparison is not subtle enough to integrate the political reality, not even at very well-known examples. I am thinking in particular at those empires built on and endowed with a militant ideological force. The necessary spread of a faith is the motivation behind the expansionist political enterprises such as the Christian empires, the French Revolutionary wars or the Soviet-driven Communist project. It is interesting to note that the empire is not a matter of governmental structure - the Roman Empire is, from the very beginning, a republic. It looks like the republican form of government is not an impediment, but, on the contrary, more an argument favouring the expansion. A republic is, after all, a political project built around an idea embraced by the entire society, every citizen being its agent. If the idea has universalistic claims, then it is the privilege of any citizen to contribute at its spreading. The same rationale is observable even in medieval, vertically organized societies when the problem in question is the fulfilment of the very objective of the polity – for instance, the Holy Roman Empire. “In an age of the most intense aristocratic exclusiveness, the highest office in the world was the only secular one open to all Christians.” [12] The emperor himself, the occupant of the only position that represents the imperial idea of defender of the Christian mission, thus escapes the ordinary hierarchical social order.

Following these remarks, it looks to me that it is necessary to make one more distinction in the case of imperial polities – on the primary direction of interest. Most of the empires are Westphalian projects – state-like units, eager to conserve their advantages in front of their neighbours, selfish, etc. – in other terms, *outer-directed* institutions. What, I suppose, Zielonka has in mind when he refers to (neo) medieval empire is an *inner-directed* project, whose primary concern is its ‘internal cohesion’, and not the ‘external problems’. From the ideological perspective, the difference is between an all-embracing ethics, which can address the entire known human universe, on one hand, and a supra-parochial entity, intended to weld, as well as possible, its components. In my view, this distinction between *inner-* and *outer-directed* institutions, suggested by John Mearsheimer [13], stresses the dynamics of the polity, the processes implied, and not only deduce them from its structure of power, as in Zielonka’s classification. The distinction suggested also allows, as I shall note, the interrogation of the security relations inside EU.

It is obvious that the above differentiation is not an absolute one, being more a matter of interpreting the policies and institutions, and not of precise criteria. On the other hand, it allows the introduction of a new nuance in distinguishing between the European and, respectively, the American empires [14]. I reject the idea of depicting the American external action in terms of imperialism on the ground of the importance given to the sovereignty of the controlled alien societies, and thus consider it in the terms of hegemony (as I have already discussed it, in a previous section of the paper). Even by considering the opposite position – of an American empire – it is clear that there

are many differences between the two polities in the ways of conducting the foreign policy, however similar in their normative approach. The sovereignty problem (a unitary and indisputable one on the Western coast of the Atlantic, diffuse, shared/delegated/multiple on the Eastern seaboard) speaks for itself in this matter. Beside it, the American foreign policy is definitely a Westphalian, outer-directed one. In comparison, the EU's seems to be inner-directed – a matter of permanent negotiations among its members, between these and the Union's institutions, etc.

What are the consequences of considering the European Union more likely an inner-directed project - at least in the economy between external *versus* domestic realms of politics? By simply translating the two criteria, following Zielonka logic it seems that it is no point in the EU's external policy. In his words, “[t]he Union has its institutions but it is missing a sense of purpose”. [1, p. 147] I disagree with Zielonka at this point, and my first argument is that the neo-medieval characterization is somehow limited to a structural analysis, mainly of the internal realm of the polity, while the supplementary criterion I suggest is a matter of political dynamism, and only as a general orientation. The second and more powerful argument in this direction is because I think that, by considering the ideological mission, it looks that EU has such a sense of purpose – is that given by its ‘mission’.

The spread of its own democratic values and norms, its peaceful procedures for resolving the social and inter-state conflicts, etc. is the core of the EU's mission. None of the polities of the Middle Age in Western Europe did exhaust the normative space – and EU does not do it, so it shares its mission with other stable democracies, such as the United States. Determining the measures needed in order to address a particular problem is a long, sometime frustrating laborious, occasionally even unsuccessful, process. That is because any component unit (Member States) has its own point of view, its sovereignty, and the Union is an inner-directed whole, which cannot surpass the power conferred by them.

The very existence of the European Union is the rational dimension of a conscious product of the efforts made by the Member States in order to build a non-Westphalian order among them, based on the respect of the same values and social meanings. The core of the effort is that the States, after years of contacts, somehow found that the mutual trust links them together, so they form a special kind of ‘inner-directed’ international institution – a ‘security community’, whose members exclude violence by conviction in the relations among them [15]. The American military involvement in post-World War II Europe helped to insulate the European states in front of the external aggressions; but it is a matter of their sovereign decision if they want or not to contribute at the common security, facing together the threats originated in the external, anarchic environment. In other words, EU as a whole is an ‘inner-directed’ project, but it is up to the Member States to decide if they want to consider themselves involved in a separate ‘outer-directed’ project, too (expressed, for instance, by NATO).

As for the direct involvement in world's affairs, this is, in certain areas at least, the result of the ideological mission, but put in a very peculiar manner. The Roman imperial heritage is, I think, the foundational political myth of European unity, with an important contribution in cohering EU. I argue that an imperial heritage is the hallmark of EU's external action, too. In my view, it is the imperial memory of its Member States, each of them built, at its time, on the Roman model. The importance of the European imperial experience is for today's EU not limited to the historical dimensions of the identities of some of its member states, but has an important role in articulating the actual manifestations of EU's contemporary mission.

I have suggested somewhere else that the dismantlement of an empire implies that some special relations replace the imperial ones between the former metropolis and the former, alien subordinated components, become independents – thus forming a *post-imperial order* – *PIO*. I have also considered two ideal-types of such post-imperial orders – *power-oriented (POPIO)* and *norm-oriented (NOPIO)*. The former imperialist builds the first one in order to replace the imperial dominance with a hegemonic one, for its own interests. In the second case (which is empirically, but not theoretically necessary, a second, possible stage), the former imperialist is 'ashamed' by its previous expansionist policy and its consequences, and thus formulates its current position and policies on a sentiment of responsibility. I have also noted that in a *POPIO*, the former imperial power looks with jealousy to other's possible interference in what it considers to be its 'natural' sphere of influence. In the altruistic *NOPIO*, on the contrary, the akin, the Civilized Other (that shares the same values, norms practices, behaviours, etc.) is invited by the former metropolitan power to bring its contribution to the management of the possible unwanted (either wrong or too slow) developments in the former subordinate society [7].

A *PIO* is, as can be seen, defined in the terms of the former imperial power. It is theoretically possible that the same metropolis builds a *POPIO* in some parts of its former empire and a *NOPIO* in others, but it is not likely to happen because the internal mechanisms involved are too different not to imply a schizoid and dramatic choice in terms of state's identities, made more and more visible in time. It is reasonable to assume, in a constructivist approach, that one rationale would eventually prevail over the other. The European Union, by comprising several former imperial powers now linked by their common democratic values, generates a 'composite' *NOPIO*.

I think that considering a European *NOPIO* is an appropriate way in approaching the EU's external policies regarding the former European colonies – from assisting the development to its military operations with civilian goals (peace and police operations, etc.). A multitude of factors – such as the European institutions, the reluctance of the Member States, public opposition, etc - simply exclude the strategic, power-seeking, military goals. With regard to the expansionist dimension of the European Union, it is one of the best arguments of its imperial nature. But the conditions put to the candidate states, the accession process itself are eloquent for the nature of its mission – it is, first

of all, a matter of compatibility in economic, cultural, social, political aspects, but not in military capabilities or strategic assets. The ‘natural’ limit of EU’s expansion is given by the social and cultural compatibility, not by the range of its interests. EU does not fit in the Westphalian logic, neither in interior, nor in exterior.

I have to insist on an important feature of EU’s external presence: its altruism. This characteristic has at least two different meanings: firstly, it is ‘altruistic’ in the sense that the objective of its external presence is not made for its own or the Member States’ interests, but for the benefits of the subject of the intervention. Secondly, it is ‘altruistic’ as being non-selfish – all the Civilized Others considered are invited at the involvement policies. The preferred Other is, definitely, the United States – and the particularities of the transatlantic relation are well known. Some may say that this is only a competition, but one that EU simply cannot afford – in terms of military capabilities, strategic interests, and so on. I do not want to address these issues here, but I think that this would be a very limited point of view, at least for the interest of this paper. The Civilized Other can be any other stable and democratic polity that has a sense of responsibility for the world’s misfortunate people and societies, for the peaceful destiny of the global community, etc. – as Japan, or Australia, and so on. Even more, the Civilized Other is regarded as a partner and a friend, not as a potential threat: in the terms of the security communities’ literature, EU is a tightly-coupled security community inside a loosely-coupled one [15].

The EU’s mission has thus in my opinion two major dimensions – an internal and an external one, the latter being more evident in its manifestations. In the absence of a central indisputable authority, it simply cannot evolve in a Westphalian entity. Therefore, for the time being at least, the neo-medieval model seems the best suited one. The general framework of the action is clear - the common normative ethics. The interpretative act of the values and norms needed in formulating a coherent position on a specific issue proves often to be a very difficult task. The non-Westphalian nature of the European Union could also bring its own contribution in this regard – the states simply are not prepared for taking a decisive step in controlling a given crisis. This is, in my opinion, a consequence of the fact that, even if the states are bonded by their adhesion to the same democratic values, norms and practices, even if they share common meanings and understandings, they dispute if and how to project these ideas in the anarchic realm. In other words, the imperial ties link them one to the other, but the states preserves the direct uses of means for themselves, in particular of those implying the most visible and acute meaning and instrument of statehood: the legitimate use of force.

5. Conclusions

Built on a constructivist approach, this paper supports the idea that the identity question of the European Union is a legitimate and fruitful path of investigation in the discussions concerning this polity. If privileging one or other

dimension of EU's double nature – as an international organization or as a supra-national entity – is largely a matter of political or theoretical choice. From the point of view of this paper, the second seems to be the most promising. I also assumed, from both theoretical and political perspectives, that EU needs an ideological line for self-definition and to project into the future – and I referred at this idea as to a 'mission'.

On these premises, I investigated two possibilities of considering EU as a polity – for now and, maybe, for the future. In the first stage, I rejected, on a sovereignty-based argument, the option of looking at the European Union as something similar to a state. That left me, from a very simple and self-assumed political taxonomy, with the other choice – EU as an empire.

Defining an empire was the task of the next section of the paper. In this regard, I took a definitional spectrum, framed by two famous formulations – having Michael Doyle's simple and functional one at one end, and the idealistic Hardt and Negri's at the other. From the first one, I noted in particular the idea of hierarchy, and that of common normative space from the second. I then considered the 'mission' of the polity as the binding material between them, as the legitimizing and guiding principle.

The discussion of EU's imperial mission implied at the beginning a distinction between types of empires: the Westphalian *versus* (neo) medieval ones. I also took into consideration a second criterion, based on the orientation of the institutions involved, thus differentiating between 'outer-directed' and 'inner-directed' projects. I therefore considered that EU has to be understood in the terms of a neo-medieval structure, 'inner-oriented' in its actions, whose members exclude violence among them, the main concern of the whole being its internal cohesion, and not the expression of its interests in the external environment.

As for the specific mission EU envisages, I consider that it can be deduced from the common ethics that links together the Member States. The geographical and cultural proximity determines the space considered for expansion and for intervention, the intervention modalities defined by the democratic, civilian, non-Westphalian logic supported. More than that, EU does not compete with any other polity for its sphere of influence, the involvements made being based on 'altruistic' reasons. The means of intervention are limited by the very neo-medieval nature of EU, any possible more energetic projection facing endless internal debates, the states preserving the right of using their defining capacity – the legitimate use of force.

As stated from the beginning, this paper does not intend to exhaust the uncountable possibilities that stand in front of EU's future evolution. Its objective is to offer an intellectual framework for making intelligible, in presumably known terms and rationales, the most innovative polity of contemporary age. Considering EU in terms of an imperial 'mission' is the way I suggest in order to refer to EU as to a polity that consider itself a successful model for the rest of the world. The ideological ingredient that stays at its very core is, in my opinion, one of the most resilient reason for both keeping the

components together and, more visible in the external realm, in offering a powerful and convincing moral argument for EU's self-assumed identity.

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