Critiques of liberal intergovernmentalism

Moravcsik’s liberal intergovernmentalism has been a major influence upon contemporary work in EU studies. Most, if not all, conceptually-informed work on the EU engages with his work (see, for example, Stone Sweet and Sandholtz, 1997). Students conducting empirical analyses of aspects of European integration have found liberal intergovernmentalism to be a useful heuristic device to assist in the ordering of data and the testing of hypotheses. Moreover, the formality with which the tenets of liberal intergovernmentalism are laid out offers an explicit challenge for sympathetic as well as rival frameworks to do the same (Lindberg, 1994: 81). Needless to say, the stimulation provided by the articulation of the liberal intergovernmentalist approach has also encouraged significant critical reflection, both upon Moravcsik’s work and upon the broader theoretical perspectives that lie beneath it.

The erstwhile neofunctionalist Leon Lindberg suggests that portions of Moravcsik’s reasoning can actually be used to bolster certain neofunctionalist claims. In particular, he draws attention to Moravcsik’s discussion of the ways in which participation at the European level allows states to manoeuvre themselves into positions of relative autonomy in relation to their domestic constituencies: ‘exactly the same analysis can be applied to an understanding of the Commission in this process of national interest formation! This is ... what neofunctionalists were trying to do or what I think I was certainly trying to do’ (Lindberg, 1994: 83). In pursuit of this point, Lindberg draws on contemporary institutionalist literatures to reinstate the importance of supranational bodies. While Moravcsik’s analysis gives space to the socializing qualities of intergovernmental institutions, Lindberg is seeking to draw an analogy between the Commission’s ability to gain entrepreneurial advantage from the diversity of preferences among member-states on the one hand, and member-state governments’ abilities to play off divided domestic interests on the other.

A similarly-inclined but rather more trenchant critique is developed by Daniel Wincott (1995b). Wincott is also concerned by Moravcsik’s emphasis upon the primacy of intergovernmentalism on the ‘supply side’ and discusses the specific empirical anomaly of the role of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in the integration process. In part, this represents a
corrective to the tendency, apparent in Moravcsik’s work, to treat the supply side almost exclusively in terms of nodal ‘history-making moments’ such as treaty revisions (Wincott, 1995b: 602–3). Indeed, liberal intergovernmentalism could be viewed as out of touch with the movement in the direction of the sorts of theoretical analysis described in the previous chapter. Perhaps this is because it seeks to offer a theory of integration rather than an analysis of EU governance.

Wincott’s boldest claim – and the one most contested by Moravcsik in his reply (Moravcsik, 1995) – is that liberal intergovernmentalism should be thought of as an ‘approach’ rather than a ‘theory’. This is because liberal intergovernmentalism as laid down by Moravcsik does not lay out the circumstances in which it could be empirically refuted. Because of this, it is impossible to treat the clear intergovernmental biases of liberal intergovernmentalism as working assumptions. Moravcsik is not attempting to make deductions on the basis of a few carefully selected assumptions. Rather, he is performing an act of closure upon certain potential sources of explanation. This contention allows Wincott, grounding himself in policy analysis, to develop an alternative account of the recent history of European integration, emphasizing the everyday practices of the EC/EU as important to its unravelling trajectory (i.e. ‘integration’). This reinstates the significance of supranational institutions in general and the ECJ in particular (1995b: 603–6). The point here is not to assert the importance of stand-alone entrepreneurial institutions, but to emphasize the significance of the interaction between institutions. Moreover, Wincott points to liberal intergovernmentalism’s failure to theorize the significance of policy feedbacks into the EU system that are the consequence of previous decisions.

Wincott also addresses the rationality assumption at the heart of LI:

Rather than assuming that the players in the EC game can review the alternatives before them synoptically and choose between them rationally, the approach presented here is based on the radical imperfection of knowledge. In such a world the position of an institution at the centre of a network of knowledge (in this case the Commission) gives the individuals working in it an advantage to be weighed against the advantages of other players (for example the member-states).

(Wincott, 1995b: 607)

The point of the sort of critique developed by Wincott is not simply to raise matters of empirical dispute, but rather to contemplate matters of epistemology that hold highly significant implications for empirical enquiry. Indeed, Moravcsik’s rebuttal of Wincott’s criticisms contains the claim that liberal intergovernmentalism does not stand or fall upon whether it fulfils the standard criteria for characterization as a deductive theory. Its application to grand bargains is described by Moravcsik as ‘a
theoretically justified first step', but there is nothing to rule out the use of liberal intergovernmentalism for the analysis of everyday decisions (Moravcsik, 1995: 613).

In addition, the two-level game approach adopted by the likes of Moravcsik has attracted substantial scrutiny, often from reasonably sympathetic quarters. Putnam’s original formulation, it has been argued, constitutes little more than a metaphor. Therefore, the approach is lacking in explanatory power and has no core propositions from which hypotheses might be generated. Its greatest usefulness is in the description of the outcomes of international exchange. It might be that the application of game theory might rectify the situation by injecting formal theoretical components into the basic metaphor. However, as two recent writers point out, ‘the application of formal game theory to international relations requires a variety of information, which has to be gained ex ante, otherwise the hypotheses cannot be tested’ (Wolf and Zangl, 1996: 356). The point here is that circular reasoning will quickly ensue as the results of the interactions need to be known before they can be predicted.

Others argue that the two-level game analogy is too simplistic. Smith and Ray (1993) begin to chip away at the association between two-level games and intergovernmentalism by expanding upon the number of levels at which significant games are played. Their notion of multi-level games clearly links with the literature on multi-level governance discussed in the previous chapter by (a) recognizing the distinctive bargaining environment offered by European institutions and (b) opening the possibility for exchange between non-state actors as a potentially decisive shaper of integration outcomes. Putnam’s original formulation suggested the significance of the following levels:

Level 1: international exchange (government–government)
Level 2: domestic politics (government–national polity).

Smith and Ray’s schema inserts three extra levels:

Level 3: institutionalized intergovernmental exchange (EC member-state–EC member-state)
Level 4: EC–non-member government exchange
Level 5: subnational exchange (national polity–national polity)
(adapted from Smith and Ray, 1993: 8–9)

The recognition that states play games at many levels simultaneously, along with the observation that various non-state actors are also players, brings the study of multi level games close to the multi-level governance position described in the previous chapter. What is clear is that even intergovernmentalists have to grapple with their well-established concepts in order to capture the distinctiveness of the EU system.