

Moravcsik v. Rosato: A Critical Review

Tommaso Pavone (tpavone@princeton.edu)

March 6th, 2014

Synopsis

In 2011, Sebastian Rosato published his doctoral dissertation, *Europe United*, with Cornell University Press.¹ The debate outlined in this critical review was waged in a recent symposium in the journal *Security Studies* and concerned the validity of the claims in *Europe United*. Although the debate features critiques of Rosato's work by both Andrew Moravcsik and Craig Parsons, I focus on the Moravcsik critique² and on Rosato's reply³ here. I then seek to put on a bullet-proof vest and provide my own brief interjection.

Rosato's Argument

Briefly, *Europe United* argues that the creation of the European Community (EC) is explained by balance of power theory derived from the realist tradition in international relations. Rosato theorizes that "states come together to balance against a common adversary and choose among different arrangements based on an assessment of their power position relative to that adversary and their coalition partners" (pg. 802).⁴ More specifically, European integration reduces to "an attempt by the major west European states... to balance against the Soviet Union and one another" (pg. 804). Rosato justifies restricting his focus to the 1950s because "[a]lthough events in the ensuing decades were important, they were less significant than the decisions of the 1950s because they involved further rather than initial surrenders of sovereignty," and indeed for Rosato the 1950s represented a leap by European states "to surrender part of their sovereignty and establish supranational institutions" (pg. 808). Decision-making during this period reflected balance-of-power thinking: for example, British reluctance to join the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Defense Community (EDC), and the EC was due to the fact that they "were more secure than their continental allies" with respect to possible Soviet attack (pg. 810). Rosato conducts nine case studies – namely of French, German, and British decision-making vis-à-vis the ECSC, the EDC, and the Treaty of Rome, to make his case.

Moravcsik's Blitzkrieg

Moravcsik's review of *Europe United* begins by praising Rosato's "ambition" and willingness to stick by a "monocausally realist theory" (pg. 773).⁵ The praise quickly ends, and the blitzkrieg follows. *Europe United* is based on "misunderstandings of the secondary literature, one-sided presentation of arguments and evidence, selective citation of primary and secondary material, outright misreadings of sources, and a failure to weight the results fairly" – in short, "major errors that distort significantly, if not misstate outright, the unambiguous meaning of evidence" (pgs. 774; 777). These problems interact with Rosato's theory: "What is right empirically (realist balancing played some role) is not new theoretically, while what is apparently new theoretically (we should return to monocausal realism) is not right empirically" (pg. 777). Ultimately, these faults "should disqualify this work from influencing the debate on the fundamental causes of European integration," for it "undermines the quality of scholarship, the prestige of historical social science, and the values of social science as a guide to policymaking" (pg. 790). Briefly, here are some of Moravcsik's grievances:

¹ Sebastian Rosato, *Europe United: Power Politics and the Making of the European Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

² Andrew Moravcsik (2013) Did Power Politics Cause European Integration? Realist Theory Meets Qualitative Methods, *Security Studies*, 22:4, 773-790, DOI: [10.1080/09636412.2013.844511](https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.844511)

³ Sebastian Rosato (2013) Theory and Evidence in Europe United: A Response to My Critics, *Security Studies*, 22:4, 802-820, DOI: [10.1080/09636412.2013.844513](https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.844513)

⁴ For page references in this section, I am referring to Rosato's *Security Studies* article.

⁵ For page references in this section, I am referring to Moravcsik's *Security Studies* article.

We've Heard It All Before: Geopolitics have always been acknowledged to play some role in European integration, “especially in the 1950s” (pg. 775). Most theories of European integration nevertheless argue that geopolitics played but a secondary role, usually behind economic interests (though some also focus on ideational factors, supranational entrepreneurship, and unintended consequences). Rosato’s theory is old news, and to the extent that it argues that geopolitics were primary, it fails methodologically make its case (see below).

Circumstantial (or No) Evidence: Rosato’s theory lacks internal validity because his evidence generally reduces to no more than “well-known circumstantial facts” (pg. 778). For example, Rosato’s case study of why the British resisted integration does not contain “a single distinctive process-tracing observation [that] directly links Britain’s greater confidence in its security [...] to any specific policy choice regarding the ECSC or EDC” (pg. 778). Similarly, Rosato fails to explain why the EDC failed, not because his argument is inherently implausible, but because he fails to provide a single piece of supporting evidence (pgs. 778-779).

Wither Alternative Explanations: A large majority – 84 percent - of Rosato’s empirical chapter is devoted to geopolitical arguments and evidence supportive of realism (pg. 779). In short, Rosato ignores alternative theories and evidence – including, for example, Alan Milward’s *Reconstruction of Western Europe*, which he never cites (pgs. 779-780). Ultimately, Rosato cherry-picks the vast literature on European integration to support his own narrative (pg. 779).

Misinterpreting Evidence: Where Rosato does rely on primary sources, he frequently misconstrues them. For example, he misattributes a May 1955 memo by the French Ambassador in Bonn and subsequently misinterprets its content: “Rosato cites this memo as further evidence that Erhard [German Minister of Economics] and German big business opposed a customs union, yet the quoted passage reports only opposition to sectoral schemes [...] a few sentences further, Francois-Poncet notes support for “the goal of a common market” by German big business and even by the arch-liberal Erhard who [...] strongly advocates ... an economic and customs union limited, at first, to the Six” (pg. 782). Further, Rosato fails to explain why France would oppose integration in the late 1940s and early 1950s when realism would predict the reverse, and indeed for “more than thirty of just over sixty years covered in the book [...] France is acting in a manner diametrically opposed to the realist prediction (pg. 783). This evidence is ignored by Rosato.

Deliberate Mirepresentation of Sources: Moravcsik cites three quotes provided by Rosato which appear to support the realist position, but where the very next sentence clearly “states the exact opposite of the view he attributes to the author” (pg. 786). For example, Rosato cites Deutsche Bundesbank and IMF official Horst Ungerer stating that “it has often been said that the EMS was not much more than an enlarged snake and a regional Bretton Woods system” – which aligns with Rosato’s assertions that the critical juncture that needs explaining is the 1950s and not the gradual and relatively less climatic changes thereafter (pg. 787). Yet Rosato fails to cite Ungerer’s next sentence: “Both views, while understandable, are not correct” (pg. 787). Moravcsik also argues that Rosato similarly misrepresents Joseph Weiler’s argument in his seminal article, “The Transformation of Europe,” and even his own book, *The Choice for Europe*⁶ (pgs. 786-787).

The 50’s Revisited: Moravcsik concludes his blitzkrieg noting that the 1950s were not perceived as a success for European integration – the ECSC, the EDC, and even the Treaty of Rome were “in one

⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

respect or another, failures” (pg. 788). What is interesting about European integration – and what may be most worthy of explanation – is the subsequent functional deepening of the Community and its transformation into the modern European Union – not a focus on the exaggerated triumph of the 1950s.

Rosato Strikes Back

Unsurprisingly, Rosato disagrees with Moravcsik’s prognosis. He provides the following series of responses:

Defense of his Theory: Rosato claims his theory is indeed original, for he is “the first scholar to propose a balance of power theory of international cooperation” and then apply it to “show that this theory can account for the formation of the EC” (pg. 805).⁷ He then argues that his theory is not monocausal nor that it draws primarily from an outdated secondary literature, as Moravcsik claims (pgs. 804-806).

Defense of focus on the 1950s: Rosato backs up his approach of focusing on the 1950s, for it was the “fundamental development” of European integration (pg. 808). He argues that he acknowledges the importance of subsequent deepening, but posits that even Moravcsik has noted that the changes have been incremental rather than taking the form of critical junctures (which presumably are more important objects of study) (ibid).

Strength of the Evidence: For Rosato, Moravcsik misunderstands what process-tracing observations are. To argue that, in order to do process tracing right, one must provide evidence that “directly links” causal and outcome variables is incorrect (pg. 810). Rather, the standard should be set at focusing on identifying “links in the causal mechanism” by locating evidence of “each posited micro-mechanism” – a lower bar that Rosato argues *Europe United* comfortably meets (ibid).

Source Quality: Rosato argues that Moravcsik is incorrect that the sources in *Europe United* are too soft and biased in favor of the secondary literature: he argues that when counting primary sources obtained directly or from secondary sources, 75 percent of his citations are based on primary evidence (pg. 811).

Sampling Bias/Sins of Omission: Rosato argues that Moravcsik is misguided in arguing that the focus on primary and secondary sources in *Europe United* that support realist theory is evidence of bias (pg. 811). Rather, this is due to the fact that “the evidence in the historical record heavily favors one version” of the story (ibid). He further notes that only ten percent of his sources are from the pre-1980 era, neutralizing Moravcsik’s critique that he was privileging older narratives that have been discounted by subsequent evidence (pg. 812). In the end, if his account appears unbalanced in favor of realist theory, it is not because he is ignoring disconfirming evidence – rather, it is because “there are no such facts to omit” (pg. 814).

Misinterpreting/Misrepresenting Sources: Finally, Rosato argues that Moravcsik is actually the one misinterpreting the sources that *Europe United* supposedly misinterprets. For example, in citing the views of Bundesbank and IMF official Horst Ungerer, Rosato was simply using him as evidence of predominant views amongst political economists – not to denote Ungerer’s own agreement with such views (pg. 808, footnote 15). He posits that the memo by the French Ambassador in Bonn noting German business’ support of a “common market “idea”” similar to the “non-supranational “OEEC”” supports the view that German business did not support integration, but merely cooperation (pg. 816). The most charitable reading of this evidence, which Moravcsik’s *Choice for Europe* fails to acknowledge, is that at best German producers did not stand in the way of deeper integration (pg. 814).

⁷ For page references in this section, I am referring to Moravcsik’s *Security Studies* article.

Adjudicating the Dispute

Let me first note that I have not read *Europe United*, and that Rosato is writing from an inherently defensive position – far from an ideal place to be. Rather than focusing on the particular items of dispute between Moravcsik and Rosato, I will focus on a few claims that Rosato makes in his reply to Moravcsik that are incorrect and render me particularly skeptical that *Europe United* forwards a valid argument.

Rosato’s claim that he is “the first scholar to propose a balance of power theory of international cooperation” seeking to explain the emergence of the EU (pg. 805) is just blind hubris. Because I am not an international relations theorist, I ran a cursory Google Scholar search and found the following results:

“balance of power theory” AND “European Union”: 945 matching results
 “balance of power theory” AND “Europe”: 2,300 matching results
 “balance of power theory” AND “EEC”: 136 matching results
 “balance of power theory” AND “ECSC”: 67 results
 “Mearsheimer” AND “EU”: 6,830 matching results

Of course, most of the articles captured in the above searches will not offer a balance of power theory that explains European integration – but surely some of them will. The “first” scholar to take a realist look at the EU and to stitch together a balance of power theory to explain the ECSC? Unlikely.

What is also baffling is how much Mearsheimer’s seductive realist spell leads Rosato to not see how his theory fails to explain European integration after the fall of the Soviet Union. “The Europeans stuck to their preexisting plans to integrate during the 1990s because their economies were performing well. They did not have a strategic rationale for preserving the EC, but they also had no incentive to kill it” (pg. 815). Rosato fails to note that Europeans did not simply fall back on a status-quo bias: they actively sought to reinvigorate European integration: the 1990s saw the transition from common market to monetary union, from European Economic Community to European Union, and integration in such critical areas as fundamental rights (via the drafting and subsequent promulgation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) and environmental policy (via the creation of the Emissions Trading System). A balance of power approach fails to explain the push for deeper integration in the 1990s. And if Europeans kept integration going “because their economies were performing well,” does it not imply that economic motives, rather than geopolitics, may have been behind the process all along?

Finally, Rosato plays fast and loose with the language of “supranationalism,” suggesting that the 1950s are worthy of study because they represented a leap to supranationalism with which the subsequent periods of incremental deepening simply cannot compare. This is a misrepresentation of the historical record. Not only did the 1957 Treaty of Rome – which should be the capstone of Rosato’s empirical evidence – drop any mention of supranationalism (which had previously been included in the ECSC Treaty), but the main critical junctures towards supranationalism occurred in 1963 and 1964 when the European Court of Justice proclaimed the supremacy and direct effect of EU law via a very creative and revisionist interpretation of the Treaty of Rome. Further, there are dozens of studies of European law that question the degree to which the Treaties of the EU can, even today, be considered to be “supranational” or “constitutional” texts. If the debate remains active and unsettled, how could Rosato possibly characterize the 1950s as representing a clean break from inter-state coordination to supranationalism? Like most things when it comes to European integration, the historical record is complicated and does not lend itself to cookie-cutter approaches.