

# SECURITY

## **European Federalism as a Common Regional Heritage**

by Fabio Masini

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### **Introduction**

After frustrated enthusiasms in the early 1950s, Europe is considering strengthening its supranational sovereignty and global actorness again, and attempts are flourishing to grab the intellectual primacy of ideas for the United States of Europe. Though struggling to trace national routes to that idea are commendable and may indeed push towards a fruitful reconsideration of the contribution that each national cultural tradition gave to the forging of such idea, we must resist the temptation to search for intellectual appropriation, that would undermine the building up of a genuine European identity. Furthermore, it would be false.

The essay in *Aeon* by Fernanda Gallo, titled “[United States of Europe](#),” provides a biased reconstruction of the role that a few Italian intellectuals and activists played during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to contributing the idea of the United States of Europe, suggesting that their pioneering effort

was key also in the first and mostly popularized document written during Fascist Italy to design a European federation: the Ventotene Manifesto *Per un'Europa libera e unita* (For a Free and United Europe). This is, again, wrong, as we shall illustrate.

Our argument will be organized into two sections. The first provides a historical reconstruction of how the idea of the United States of Europe arose, gathered momentum, and was set aside in the European public debate. The second section explores the reasons why this happened and attempts a tentative explanation of what may be expected next.

### **A Historical Reconstruction**

The idea of a federal Europe was well rooted in most European countries since earlier centuries. In its most modern form, it might be traced back to France, where the Abbé de Saint-Pierre drafted in 1713 a visionary *Projet pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe* (A project to make peace perpetual in Europe), that would later influence Immanuel Kant and his *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf* (Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch), first published in 1795.

In the meanwhile, around M.me De Staël and the Chateau de Coppet, close to Geneva, the intellectual foundations of what would become a few key principles upon which a European statehood could be built along national ones were laid down, that would later be used for concrete actions to establish a federal ‘Swisse Confederation’ (as, despite its name, it is indeed a form of federal government).

Since the second half of the 1830s new information coming from the United States of America fueled the debate on a federal Europe, when Alexis de Toqueville’s *De la democratie en Amerique* started circulating across the Old Continent. Now, there was a successful constitutional benchmark for European integration: the establishment in Philadelphia in 1787 of the United States of America, that inspired the idea of pursuing the United States of Europe.

This would soon become a model for several revolutionary and reformist intellectuals and activists around Europe, not only in Italy, especially since 1848. Each time a revolution was initiated somewhere in Europe, pressures for national democratic advancement were paralleled by calls for some kind of European union (think of Victor

Hugo, Alphonse de Lamartine, etc). And even in Italy, not only Mazzini and Cattaneo (who was indeed among the first to advocate for the United States of Europe in his *Memorie sull'Insurrezione di Milano del 1848*), referred to by Fernanda Gallo in the above-mentioned article, should be named, but also Garibaldi, the hero of the Italian unification in 1861. Gallo is right to underline the multilayered vision that these people had of both national integration/identity and European integration/identity. They had a rather hazy understanding of the nature of American federalism, but were very clear in mind that only relying on the national level would undermine momentum for revolution, and that also pursuing a genuine supranational democracy could make their dream come true and be sustainable in the long term.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it would be Luigi Einaudi to recall, building on the British debates, the importance of federalism as a model for peacebuilding in Europe. In that period, increasing convergence started emerging between those who were exploring the virtues of federalism as a constitutional device to guarantee at the same time decentralization and strategic unity, applied to a reform of the Commonwealth, and to European

integration design. This is one of the reasons why Britain, maybe surprisingly to a modern-day observer, would become the cradle of European federalist thought during the 1920s and 1930s.

A cross fertilization emerged between federalism as a solution to the long-term sustainability of the Commonwealth and to European designing, that gathered further momentum between the two World Wars, when it was becoming manifest that without a European federation world peace would never be secured. For example, in Italy, Einaudi, Giovanni Agnelli, and Attilio Cabiati explicitly referred to Clarence Streit's and Norman Angell's articles and volumes on European federalism as an inspiration for their pamphlets. A regional federation in Europe was seen as an attempt to overcome the collective action problem arising at the global level with the Society of nations and its manifest shortcomings.

Between the two WWs the whole of Europe largely explored pioneering solutions towards a European statehood, building along the path set by the Thirteen Colonies in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and providing extensive material to advocate for the United States of Europe. Aristide Briand, Gustav Stresemann, Alexander Marc, Francois Perroux,

Philip Kerr (Lord Lothian), Harold Laski, Lionel Robbins, Barbara Wootton, William Beveridge, Friedrich August von Hayek, just to name a few and most representative figures (although from different cultural perspectives), led the way to a meta-ideological convergence on the virtues of a European federation, with various academic papers and advocacy initiatives and pamphlets.

In the 1930s, Britain was leading, within a whole continent that was largely debating on it, both the theory of federalism and the emergence of policy options to be pursued at the European level, once political conditions would turn favorable for a workable project. It was precisely the federalist thought of a few British economists that inspired the Ventotene Manifesto. Altiero Spinelli (who was the main drafter of the Manifesto) and Ernesto Rossi, being confined in the Isle of Ventotene under the control of the fascist militia, could only receive books concerning technical arguments. This is how Einaudi managed to send Rossi a few books by British economists, among which Robbins's *Economic Planning and International Order* (1937) stands out for its paramount importance, being the one Spinelli referred to in his diaries as the main source of inspiration for the Manifesto (1941).

The Manifesto and the subsequent establishment, upon the initiative of Spinelli, of the European Federalist Movement in 1943 made federalism become a policy strategy, meant to create a two-tier European integration, along the model outlined by Kenneth C. Wheare in the early 1940s. This is the only moment in which the Italian initiative was key to shifting widespread intellectual interest towards European federalism into political action. But it was not based on previous Italian contributions by Cattaneo and Mazzini, that only marginally impacted on the building up of Ernesto Rossi's culture and on the way both Rossi and Spinelli thought of it as an innovative, revolutionary process. It was mainly the British authors, deeply rooted in a European-wide debate, that inspired the logic of the Manifesto, as we recalled above.

After WWII, there was a widespread consensus on the need to create a supranational sovereignty along national ones across the whole Europe, with the birth of the European Union of Federalists (1946), the European League for Economic Cooperation (1946), the European Movement (1948); more or less all oriented towards the establishment, in various degrees, of the United States of Europe.



What mostly differentiated them was the strategy to achieve such a goal.

After the Schuman Declaration of 1950 and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, Jean Monnet led a group of public servants in the struggle to achieve, through a functional strategy, a European federation, while Italian federalism took a much more radical turn, struggling both among European citizens and in the European institutions for a constitutional process of supranational sovereignty building. The major achievements of such struggle were the direct elections of the European Parliament and the entry into force of the European Monetary System, in 1979, both intellectually inspired and publicly supported by federalist figures; and the Treaty that Spinelli managed to have the European Parliament pass in 1984, recalled by Gallo. We may add that another Italian figure was later key in the making of the single currency, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa. But, again, Spinelli, Padoa-Schioppa, and all the Italian federalists, were *European figures*, rather than national ones. They were at the center of international connections and networks without which it would be impossible for them to pursue their goals. Mansholt, Triffin, Marjolin, Werner,

Giscard d’Estaing, Brandt, Delors, and many others formed, with the above-mentioned Italians, an epistemic community that was crucial to the advancement of European integration.

The idea of European federalism was and is not the outcome of a single national intellectual effort, but rather a joint European one, ironically including the UK, which has since the advent of Thatcher opposed any attempt at turning the European integration project into a fully-fledged federation.

### **Perspectives on the United States of Europe**

The key point for the future of Europe, nevertheless, is not identifying a leading country in the federalist thought, but trying to understand what happened to the ideal of European federalism that inspired the first protagonists of the early steps in the building of a European statehood, and later faded into an intergovernmental governance, so that we are now still far from a constitutional federal architecture. Why, given such widespread and high-level sympathy for the idea of the United States of Europe, we are not yet there? What were the reasons for this failure?

One *prima-facie* answer to these questions is that a federal structure was – and apparently is told to be – against the interest of the ruling national political elites, that did not want to surrender (although having the exclusive privilege of being able to make a choice in that direction) part of their power and devolve it to a supranational entity. A second answer is that the Cold War imposed the logic of opposing blocks on the integration process, thus not allowing any autonomous diplomatic behavior (and global actorness) from Europe, as became manifest when, after the Korean War, the USA preferred to strengthen the NATO, rather than having a European Defense Community (which, after being signed, missed the ratification process at the National Assembly in France in August 1954), with the unaware complicity of part of the political Left, especially in France.

A more subtle line of thought suggests that the European integration project indeed followed the direction that some federalist authors had outlined during the 1930s and 1940s, and Europe became precisely what a few federalist authors had dreamed of. The construction of technocratic, hardly democratically representative supranational bodies much resembles the Hayekian ideal of a federal

technical body ruling the supranational dimension of markets, superimposed upon the (national) centers of democratic representation and (degenerate) political pressures. Much of the current structure of the EU is indeed very close to this ideal.

This is a tricky and largely debated issue, in which the influence of neoliberal and ordoliberal thought in the making of the European Union's economic and political architecture has been explored. We already argued somewhere else that this is mostly an unintended outcome of the resistance of national elites to surrender power: they instrumentally used the arguments by neoliberal authors to support their defense of national sovereignty, letting a technocratic economic elite to rule financial markets and economic relations, which in turn was instrumental to building the narrative that austerity was imposed by Europe, not by a deliberate (although constrained) choice of national governments. This ended up in an increasing delegitimization of European institutions that eventually led to the emergence of euro-exit narratives and calls for a return to a confederative structure of sovereign nation-States.

Another argument worth dwelling upon concerns the negative influence that the combined adoption of a single currency without a federal governing structure of economic policy, and the subsequent EU enlargement while the project of a European constitution failed, had on the public perception of the ability of Europe to deliver on its promises of a prosperous future for the European citizens. Enlargement was unavoidable, as an instrument to consolidate the transition of eastern European countries to liberal democracies. The failure to establish a constitution was essential in weakening the whole structure of economic and political governance of the EU, leaving its federal bodies without the legitimacy of a federal political project.

In the latest years, at least since the Maastricht Treaty, the confederal bias of European governance undermined the success of the partial construction towards a European statehood. And we are currently paying the bill for the missed opportunities that we had in the past to create the United States of Europe.

After the threefold shock that hit the world in the last four years (pandemic, wars, the return of inflation) Europe can no longer rely on its

traditional growth model, based on a delegation of security to the USA, energy supply from Russia, and a huge market of low-cost imports and value-added export in China. Such a model is no longer tenable and must be completely rethought.

This has recently led to calls for an increasing strategic autonomy and European sovereignty, accompanied by enquiries on the costs of non-Europe in specific industries (EP 2024), in the general industrial and competitive framework (Letta 2024), and the forthcoming document by Draghi (2024) on the future of EU competitiveness.

It is currently difficult, after the results of the EU-Parliament elections, to predict which compromises will emerge and which goals will be reinforced (and which will be abandoned). Let me only highlight that if a Hayekian perspective was pursued until recently, and if a Keynesian-like, country-specific expansion was collectively agreed upon with the covid, the third integration model, based on Robbins' multilayered democracy has not yet been experimented. It might be high time to test it.

**Concluding remarks**

Summing up, calls for the United States of Europe were and are, I would add *luckily*, the product of cross-fertilization and dissemination of ideas, not the outcome of a single national intellectual effort.

Providing a country-specific, biased narrative of a noble and largely shared solution to the European civil coexistence does not serve the purpose of creating a European identity, which is crucial to give a chance to the ideal of eventually building the United States of Europe.

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