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## Unity of the European Union: A Social Psychological Comment

IBPP Editor  
bloomr@erau.edu

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**Abstract.** This article comments on an analysis by Ronald Steel, a contributing editor to *The New Republic*, on causal contributors to European Union (EU) unity.

In a recent Issue of the *The New Republic*, contributing editor Ronald Steel observes that EU unity has been steadily increasing. He cites examples of increasing unity--some as causal antecedent, some as consequence, some as both. These include the (1) coming advent of a common currency, (2) controversial but resultant agreement over the first two presidents of the European Central Bank, (3) potential challenge by the euro to the dollar's dominance as the global currency, (4) trend towards more efficient European economies, (5) projected economic growth of 3% across the EU, (6) decreasing unemployment, (7) increasing privatization, and (8) more manageable inflation and deficits. Steel then states that unity also is being reinforced by the absence of a serious external threat.

What is surprising about this last statement is that it seems to contradict the lore of political science and of social psychology. As to the former, Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution* analyzes four very different political revolutions in which insurgent homogeneity before overthrow of the establishment becomes heterogeneity after it. Moreover, political leaders, political philosophers, political operatives, and journalists have long observed that fostering an external threat can--at least in the short term--substitute a cohesive sense of identification and purpose for destabilizing fragmentation.

As to the latter, Thompson et al (1997) found that ingroup perceptions of ingroup homogeneity increase as the content of items to be rated by ingroup members increase in external threat. Lee and Ottati (1995) found that external negative stereotype threats inconsistent with an ingroup's autostereotype increase ingroup member's perceptions of ingroup homogeneity. Rothberger (1997) found that increased outgroup threat increases perceptions of ingroup homogeneity.

More indirectly, Hidaka and Yamaguchi's work on ingroup consensus estimation--the degree of Issue agreement among ingroup members as judged by these members--also supports the converse of Steel's presumption. Hidaka and Yamaguchi (1997) found that the greater the informed difference between ingroup and outgroup on a variety of topics--especially those that are evaluated as relevant for the ingroup--the greater the ingroup consensus estimation. Here there is a positive correlation between external cognitive threat and internal cognitive unity.

A complementary tradition is exemplified by Gaertner et al (1996) who found that elements of the common ingroup identity model and the contact hypothesis--equal status between groups, cooperative interdependence, opportunity for self-revealing interactions, and egalitarian norms--induce a larger ingroup made up of an initial ingroup and outgroup through transforming membership perceptions of the original two groups from "us" and "them" to "we". In essence, a new, larger, homogeneous group is induced through a newly shared external threat: any entity not sharing the new group's salient perceptions.

Yet another tradition is exemplified by Noel et al (1995) who found that peripheral ingroup members manifest greater disparity between public and private negativity towards outgroups than core ingroup members when the ingroup is desirable. Here, peripheral members of a group advocate more derogation and coercion towards an outgroup than core members as a vehicle to enhance the peripherals' insecure ingroup status through an increased public-private disparity that functions as portraying little public disparity (increased homogeneity) with the assumed values of core members.

However, there is a theoretical vehicle to render Steel's hypothesis compatible with political science and social psychology lore. Perhaps, EU unity is increasing partially through the substitution of one external threat for another--the United States for the Soviet Union. In fact, an external threat more compatible in some ways with EU values could be reacted to more severely than one judged to be less compatible. Such a theoretical vehicle might be less counterintuitive than one might think, for haven't religious, nationalist, and ethnic schisms often fostered the greatest homogeneity within schismatic groups and perceived external threat among them? In the crudest terms, external hate supporting internal love illustrates an emotional relationship that--to many political actors and observers--is too close for comfort. (See Brinton, C. (1965). *The anatomy of revolution* (Rev. and Exp. ed.). NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1938); Hidaka, Y., & Yamaguchi, S. (1997). Effects of the perception of intergroup difference between ingroup and outgroup upon ingroup consensus estimation. *Japanese Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 165-176; Lee, Y-T, & Ottati, V. (1995). Perceived ingroup homogeneity as a function of group membership salience and stereotype threat. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 610-619; Noel, J.G., Wann, D.L., & Branscombe, N.R. (1995). Peripheral ingroup membership status and public negativity toward outgroups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 127-137; Rothberger, H. (1997). External intergroup threat as an antecedent to perceptions in ingroup and outgroup homogeneity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 1206-1212; Steel, R. (June 1, 1998). Eurotrash. *The New Republic*, 11-13; Thompson, S.C., Kohles, J.C., Otsuki, T.A., & Kent, D.R. (1997). Perceptions of attitudinal similarity in ethnic groups in the US: Ingroup and outgroup homogeneity effects. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 209-220.) (Keywords: European Union, EU, Ingroup, Outgroup, Political Unity, Social Heterogeneity, Social Homogeneity.)