A Critical Summary of A Certain Idea of Europe (Intro, Chpt. 1), by Craig Parsons
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The Argument: Bringing Ideas Back In
Parsons argues that what spurred Europeans beyond the framework of the nation-state was a particular set of ideas that grew in Western Europe in the postwar era. “Europeans began to reconsider long-held assumptions about costs, benefits, and appropriate forms of international cooperation. The EU gradually arose because certain leaders repeatedly chose "community" or "supranational" solutions over "confederal" or "traditional" alternatives to resolve problems” (pg. 1). Specifically, Parsons argues that “only community ideas led to the EU's three most prominent policy elements: the Common Agricultural Policy, the Single Market, and the Single Currency” (pg. 2). Parsons counters what he labels “structuralist” explanations of European integration, noting that this process “does not reflect an inevitable recognition of the increasing imperatives of European interdependence. If it did, these actors would not have actively opposed each institutional step when it occurred. But in the aftermath of each step, earlier critics decided to accept it” (pg. 26). What made the difference was the institutionalization of pro-community ideas, championed by a limited number of Eurofederalists. As they incrementally advanced their pro-European agenda and negotiated important treaty successes that created and thickened pan-European institutions, Eurofederalists obtained “a gradual narrowing of possibilities over time” (pg. 31). Far from being locked into a path towards greater European unity, Eurofederalists made conscious choices to pursue this path, often in light of opposition from interest groups, British euroskepticism, and public agnosticism. Only an ideational theory of European integration explains this behavior.

The Case Study: French Policymaking on European Integration (1947-1950)
Parsons argues that “while the victory of the EU was not determined solely in France, the key battles of European ideas were fought there. And French insistence on the community model repeatedly decided the outcome” (pg. 2). More importantly, the French case allows Parsons to isolate the causal impact of ideas. France was far from united in favor of supranational European institutions: indeed, “rather than reflecting a consensual national strategy […] French initiatives all emerged from a deep internal policy battle […] When pro-community leaders achieved power on other issues, they gained the autonomy – never the mandate – to assemble support behind their personal ideas on Europe” (pg. 2). These Eurofederalists were leaders composed one of three ideological strands in French debates about Europe, specifically the “community” path: “Community advocates drew a more radical conclusion from the world wars and rising economic interdependence. Legitimacy followed welfare functions; to maximize European’ long-term security and prosperity, the fractious nation-states had to be modified” (pg. 24). Specifically, community advocates perceived that the integration of French and German policymaking via supranational institutions would best secure France’s future (pg. 38). The community advocates competed against French traditionalists and confederalists. Traditionalists “located the enduring structures of power and legitimacy solely in the nation-state” and favored no more than long-standing intergovernmental bargains that would not threaten French sovereignty (pg. 24). They favored the reconstruction of Europe around a dismembered Germany (pg. 38). Confederalists “also saw nation-states as lasting realities but tempered their absoluteness with explicitly liberal, Anglophilic pragmatism,” and were therefore open to new institutional structures so long as the British were incorporated into the new European framework (pg. 24). They favored Franco-British supervision of Germany via broad continental institutions (pg. 38). For Parsons, there was no form of historical or structural-functional determinism that ensured that the community track would be adopted; from 1947 to 1950, “these tracks were all viable in international bargaining; and […] the community track was chosen only due to leaders whose ideas on Europe distinguished them from
most of their compatriots” (pg. 39). In particular, Parsons focuses on Jean Monnet’s initial plan for Franco-German cooperation in coal and steel production, and French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman’s endorsement of the proposal and willingness to “[push] ahead, despite widespread shock (in France and elsewhere) at their willingness to prioritize a supranational framework over British participation” (pg. 59). In particular, Parsons argues that three factors explain why the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) “was ratified amid popular indifference, interest group opposition, and coalitional weakness”: 1) Schuman’s ability to frame the ECSC treaty as a fait accompli – the best France would be able to get at the time; 2) partisan and political pressures for political cohesion, particularly during a period of French politics that saw significant political volatility and partisan fragility; and 3) side payments on colonial policies being delivered to traditionalist opponents of the deal (pg. 63). Political dexterity may have helped Schuman and Monnet push the ECSC treaty through, but only their ideological commitment to do so led them away from the alternative paths of least resistance towards the more difficult path of European unity.

The Theoretical Approach and Method
Parsons seeks to break new ground in the ideational literature on the EU in two ways. First, he notes that ideational studies have not traced the process by which certain ideas become embedded as constitutive norms or identities. Parsons thus seeks to remedy this gap in the ideational literature. He argues “not that ideas cause actors to make certain choices, but that the institutionalization of certain ideas gradually reconstructs the interests of powerful actors” (pg. 6). Parsons focuses directly on ideas about “Europe,” rather than about national identities, which has been the predominant focus of the constructivist literature on Europe (pg. 7). He argues that “culture is a “tool kit” or “repertoire” of ways to organize behavior,” and that ideas “are packages of related causal and normative assumptions that assign costs and benefits to possible actions” (ibid). But how to isolate the causal impact from ideas? Two challenges stand out in particular: first, ideas are “Janus-faced,” in the sense that they may constitute an actor’s material interests or be leveraged to justify said interests; second, it is particularly difficult to separate and isolate the “subjective component of an actors’ interests from direct responses to their environment” (pg. 10). Parsons’ approach is to consider cases where ideas cross-cut existing and “objective” political and material cleavages: “Given a deeply crosscutting pattern of debate across a range of options, persistent divisions, and good rhetorical evidence, we can conclude that ideas alone are causing individual variation across that range” (pg. 13). Parsons adds that “we could isolate ideas precisely if we found an extremely close comparison, contrasting actors in near-identical places in the objective world to highlight the purely ideational variations in their behavior” (pg. 12). Some coalition leaders may, for example, be in the same objective political/economic condition as their followers, but still disagree with them on ideational grounds – the resulting debates must thus be “caused by variation in ideas alone” (pg. 15).

A Critique
Parsons’ ideational theory is either the most modest constructivist approach ever employed or is an institutionalist (and occasionally structuralist) theory in disguise. Parsons seems to straw-man alternative approaches by incorrectly equating liberal intergovernmenalism with structuralism and neofunctionalism with institutionalism (pgs. 3-4). He thus seems to imply that if he can poke holes in the theory of liberal intergovernmenalism (pgs. 29-30) and neofunctionalism (pg. 23), then he has somehow refuted institutionalist and structuralist explanations while simultaneously confirming the ideational foundation of his own approach. Yet Parsons explicitly admits that he adopts the vocabulary of historical institutionalism and is largely in agreement with the new institutionalist approach to European integration generally (pgs. 16-17). In fact, Parsons’ approach is so institutionally focused that he argues that interests are institutionally constructed (pg. 19). Yet if interests are institutionally constructed, can’t ideologies be similarly constructed by institutions? And if this is the case, does this
not reduce “ideas” to but one possible mechanism underlying institutionalist accounts of European integration? At times, Parsons even seems to adopt a structuralist perspective – consider his account of the origins of the three ideational tracks in French policymaking vis-à-vis Europe: “From 1948 to 1950, the French consensus on European policies dissolved. Under the stress of massive environmental change, long-held notions about French interests in Europe began to be reconsidered. In addition to the major geopolitical and economic pressures described above, major domestic-political shifts created opportunities for new ideas” (pg. 43). Clearly, ideas are the dependent variable in this narrative (dependent on a structurally “massive environmental change”), not the independent variable driving European integration. As such, Parsons’ account fails to prove the independent causal role that ideas play, at best relegating them to a mediating or secondary role vis-à-vis institutions and, on occasion, broader structural changes. Finally, insofar as Parsons’ ideational approach commendably seeks to overcome the structural determinism that underlies some structuralist approaches to regional integration by focusing on individual agency, he fails to persuasively distinguish how “ideas” are conceptually distinct from “preferences” and, to a slightly lesser extent, from economic interest. Parsons’ account is persuasive in explicating why Schuman and Monnet’s actions were not necessarily rational from an electoral point of view; but if they clearly believed that it was in France’s economic interest to forge a Franco-German alliance for the production of coal and steel, then presumably ideology once again vanishes from the causal picture.