“Sovereignty cannot . . . be transferred effectively through a formula, only through a function.”

David Mitrany: From Federalism to Functionalism

Mihai Alexandrescu

In a 1995 study, Cornelia Navari saw functionalism as a component of that idealism which had managed to survive nationalism and totalitarianism. At the same time, Ben Rosamond considered that, in the history of international relations, the “key figure of functionalist theory is David Mitrany.” On the other hand, in a recently published study, Craig N. Murphy contended that Mitrany was far from being the first to develop a functionalist approach to international cooperation.

Functionalism is a theoretical approach which emerged towards the middle of the past century as an alternative to federalist designs concerning the organization of the international system. Starting from the criticism of the functionalist approach, many theorists sought to propose other theoretical alternatives. In time, functionalism got to be seen as a theory of European integration. Mitrany’s 1965 reaction to the evolution of the European project in the aftermath of World War Two highlighted his adversity to any formula involving regionalization.
In the present study, we shall proceed to analyze the intellectual background of Mitrany and his progression towards a functionalist approach, his ideas on international government, his comparison between federalism and functionalism, as well as the place occupied by Mitrany and his ideas in the historiography of international relations.

The Environment that Shaped the Functionalist Ideas

In a study concerning the intellectual and professional background of David Mitrany, we indicated that “little has been written about Mitrany’s life and work. Nevertheless, as early as the time of the First World War, his statements were cited in pieces devoted to the developments occurred in Central and Southeastern Europe.” In chronological order, the authors who wrote about his life and work are Paul Taylor, Cornelia Navari, Gerhard Michael Ambrosi, and Dorothy Anderson. In what concerns the functionalist approach, references to it abound when it comes to studies concerning both international relations in general and the theories of European integration. The richest source of information concerning D. Mitrany’s life and intellectual activity are the memoirs he published in 1975 in *The Functional Theory of Politics*.

In 1917 he went on a lecture tour across the United Kingdom, in support of the idea of a permanent peacekeeping organization. He was accompanied by four other lecturers, among whom we find Leonard Woolf and H. N. Brailsford. During this tour, Mitrany spoke about “Small States and the League of Nations.”

In 1919 he was invited to join the Advisory Committee on International Affairs of the Labor Party. He remained a member until 1931, alongside people like Norman Angell, G. D. H. Cole, Harold Laski and Leonard Woolf. All of the above were interested in the workings of the international system, seeking to define the role of nation-states in the aftermath of World War I.

As a Berlin correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*, between 1919 and 1922 Mitrany came into contact with numerous leading personalities of the interwar period, such as, for instance, Hjalmar Schacht, who later became a German government minister, and J. M. Keynes.

After 1922, Mitrany was introduced to the American academic environment, as a member of the Carnegie International Peace Foundation, led by then by James T. Shotwell. D. Anderson contended that the activity he carried out within this institution (1922–1928) was the “basis for much of the later development of Mitrany’s thought.” From 1933 to 1958 (except for the war years), Mitrany taught at the School of Politics and Economics of the Institute for
Advanced Studies belonging to Princeton University. During the years spent in American universities he laid the foundations of the functionalist approach, choosing the alternative of planned functionalism, as opposed to the democratic functionalism advocated by Mary Parker Follett.\textsuperscript{11}

Following a series of conferences held at Harvard and Yale, he published two of his theoretical studies concerning the international system, “The Political Consequences of Economic Planning” and “The Progress of International Government.”

He had the opportunity to present his functionalist ideas at the beginning of the Second World War, when he joined the Foreign Research and Press Service (an academic information group) of the Foreign Office. Thus, in January 1941, he submitted a document entitled “Territorial, Ideological, or Functional International Organization?” According to Mitrany, his superiors were polite but clearly uninterested in his proposals, as at the time the dominant trend was in favor of federalist designs.\textsuperscript{12} Under these circumstances, he left the working group in question and, in 1943, he published the project in pamphlet format, under the title \textit{A Working Peace System: An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organization}. The text gained notoriety and was translated into Italian, Danish, and Norwegian.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{International Government}

The first public presentation of his functionalist approach to international relations occurred during a series of conferences held at Yale University in 1932. Even at that time, Mitrany was contending that the major impediment to a global society was the “worship” of political borders. In his view, the alternative consisted of a “functional integration of material activities on an international scale and cultural devolution on a regional basis.”\textsuperscript{14} His 1932 piece, “Political Consequences of Economic Planning,” and the lectures published in 1933 under the title \textit{The Progress of International Government} feature some of his early ideas on the general tendencies manifest in contemporary society: “The ends of international government in no way differ from those of municipal government.”\textsuperscript{15} In his argumentation we notice the presence of elements inspired by his liberal pluralist contemporaries. Cornelia Navari wrote that the British pluralist doctrine had become the lifeblood of Mitrany’s theory.\textsuperscript{16} In light of this doctrine, he distinguished between nationality and nationalism, indicating that the latter was an instrument employed by the state or by those desirous of power:
There is really little in common between nineteenth century nationalism, which was liberal, and present day nationalism, which is socialistic. Perhaps one might sum it up politically by saying that the first was concerned essentially with establishing a national state, the present with changing the life within that state.17

In what concerns the state, Mitrany argued that it found itself in an unenviable position, organizing a group-nation on the basis of conformity in order to secure the cohesion, the discipline, and the loyalty vital for its survival.18 As a consequence of the First World War and of the great economic crisis, states had chosen in favor of economic planning, a protectionist measure consonant with the defensive logic of the state. Because the international system was anarchical and marred by inequalities between countries, in his 1933 study Mitrany indicated that he was chiefly concerned with “the working of a possible new international system rather than with its ethics.”19 The same author claimed that “if an international Government were to arise, . . . the employment of force by such Government would be comparable to its employment by the ministers of justice within a State.”20 Nation-states had to be replaced by a system of functional international agencies, through a permanent transfer of functions and authority between states and the international bodies.

The idea of international cooperation was elaborated upon by L. T. Hobhouse, and then by L. Woolf and G. D. H. Cole. The main rationale behind it was that “peace is more than the absence of violence.” On the other hand, Mitrany argued that a world community was a prerequisite for world government. Nationalism and international anarchy were seen as the causes behind the division of the world community into rival units. He believed that the establishment of such a community would solve the problems plaguing the international system.21

A Working Peace System

In a recent study, Craig N. Murphy contended that Mitrany was by no means the first to develop the functionalist model for the organization of the international system. He made reference to the book published in 1918 by Mary Parker Follett and entitled The New State: Group Organization, the Solution of Popular Government. The list can go on, without us having to stray far from Mitrany’s intellectual entourage. Examples in this respect are Leonard Woolf’s International Government (1916), Harold Laski’s The State in Theory and Practice (1935), in which he pleaded for a community of states having equal rights and
obligations, with all actors involved in a network of international relations defined on the basis of precise norms.22

In his memoirs, Mitrany admitted that a “first window” into the functionalist approach to social and political matters had been opened by L. T. Hobhouse and G. Wallas. The two had rejected the traditional approach to the study and teaching of political history, “allergic to the slightest whiff of dogmatism.”23

The piece that made Mitrany famous in Western academic circles and in the historiography of international relations was his 1943 brochure called A Working Peace System: An Argument for the Functional Development of International Organization. It practically introduced Mitrany’s name into the great theoretical debate from the middle of the 20th century on the development of the international system. He remained an active participant in this discussions forum, publishing studies like A Road to Security (1944), The Functional Approach to World Organization (1948), World Unity and the Nations (1950), The Prospect of Integration: Federal or Functional (1965), The Functional Approach in Historical Perspective (1971), A Political Theory of the New Society (1975).

The brochure published by Mitrany in 1943 accompanied the de jure collapse of the system of the League of Nations, as the Second World War was raging. As a member of the Foreign Research and Press Service of the Foreign Office, Mitrany presented to the group (1941) and then to his superiors (1942) a project called “Territorial, Ideological, or Functional International Organization?” The document analyzed in minute detail the existing international system, as well as the plans for its postwar reorganization. Mitrany claimed that a federal union only involved an increase in the territorial and administrative basis, failing to tackle the offensive potential of the protagonists: “We must put our faith not in a protected peace, but in a working peace.”24

Mitrany envisaged a world organized on the basis of functional relations. He advocated a combination between international organization and national freedom, as obviously all protagonists did no share the same interests and, conversely, all common interests were not equal in all countries.25

In 1942, the leaders of the Foreign Office showed little interest in the document presented by Mitrany. Consequently, he left the working group, returned to Chatham House, and published his proposals in pamphlet format in 1943.

Returning to this project, Mitrany started from the idea that the aim of any unification design, from the Middle Ages to the present day, had been to bring about a peaceful international system. Still, historical development had led to a mosaic of separate national units. At a time when European and American pancontinental designs were receiving massive support from both politicians and intellectuals, Mitrany suggested the model of an “expanded network” of international activities and agencies, achieved by way of a gradual process involving the integration of all nations, also called ramification process.26
Mitrany argued in favor of a functionalist approach which would supersede the importance of borders through a “natural growth of common activities and common administrative agencies.”

The theorist of the functionalist approach to international relations spoke about the efficiency of transferring a part of a country’s economic sovereignty to international executive agencies serving a clearly defined purpose.

According to Laura Cram, the key to understanding Mitrany’s vision lies in the distinction he made between political-constitutional cooperation and technical-functional cooperation in the emergence of the new international society. The originality of this approach has nothing to do with the introduction of the concept of functionality in international relations, but rather with the manner in which it was expanded to cover the various levels of the relations between international protagonists.

The interwar world system was defined by its inter-national character, with nation-states as its main protagonists. Other actors began to emerge at the beginning of the past century, such as international organizations and multinational companies. Their sectorial activity extended beyond national borders. Starting from these models and having seen the failure of the League of Nations, Mitrany wanted to see the model of transnational organization extended to the whole world. His experience as a journalist, diplomat, and analyst of international relations helped him identify the manner in which states could be drawn closer together in order to develop some fields which ignored the limitations of political geography. This approach is called functionalism because it refers to the need to confer a functional/operational character to the relations between protagonists.

This type of sociological analysis of international relations ran contrary to the Westphalian tradition consecrated at the middle of the 17th century. David Mitrany refuted the idea of the organization project involving a process of planned integration. He advocated a transnational cooperation likely to grow into a system of interdependence, dominated by the need to solve mutual problems. Considering the interwar experience and that of the Second World War, Mitrany argued that “we must put our faith not in a protected peace, but in a working peace.”

The working peace system was built around international agencies. They had functional responsibilities in managing those problems for which there was a consensus to cooperate. These international agencies were to assume some of the attributions of nation-states, within the so-called ramification process which involved a constant transfer of functions and authority from states to agencies. The phenomenon in question made no distinction between protagonists. The consequence of ramification was a domino effect, as cooperation in one field could lead to a new cooperation in another field.
According to Mitrany, countries had to enjoy limited internal agential power, enough to meet the individual needs of their citizens. Even so, the state cannot fully satisfy all human needs, and therefore the solution was to gradually expand the functional international institutions.30

Mitrany detailed his functionalist approach in response to the federalist designs of that time. In fact, G. M. Ambrosi even contended that “in Mitrany’s functionalism one could maybe detect a critical reaction to the grand design of Popovici”31 who, in 1906, had proposed a federalization of Central Europe into the United States of Greater Austria.

Federalism vs. Functionalism

Between the conception of a universal league and that of continental union there is, therefore, a difference not merely of degree but of essence. The last one would proceed in the old way by a definition of territory, as a means of differentiating between members and outsiders; a league would select and define functions for the contrary purpose of integrating the interests of all.32

This fragment is present in Mitrany’s “Pan-Europa: A Hope or a Danger?” (1930), then in The Progress of International Government (1933: 116), and finally in The Functional Theory of Politics (1975: 154).

This is what Mitrany wrote in 1914, in Noua Revistă Română (The New Romanian Review):

There is no indication that a union between the great nations of Europe is impossible. On the contrary, history shows that enemy nations can become good friends and allies . . . If, through its efforts, the League succeeds in creating the core of such a union, then the general grouping of all remaining nations of Europe will be relatively easy to achieve. And, in time, with goodwill and mutual sympathy, the supreme ideal could be reached: the federated states of Europe. The difficulties faced by a reform are commensurate to its importance. Consequently, a lot of time and a lot of work are needed in order to put these ideas into practice, but the goal is worthy of any effort.33

What made David Mitrany so radically alter his ideas concerning the organization of the international system and replace federalism with the functionalist alternative? It is a question that he himself felt compelled to answer.

The year 1914 came at the end of three decades of continental peace. The shock of the war, with its magnitude and complexity, brought to the surface latent
conflicts, both social and national. That generation was accustomed to the presence of an organized international system, albeit an anarchic one. Secret diplomacy and the concert of European voices gave the illusion of permanence, seemingly ruling out all process of change. Or, the shock of the First World War revealed the presence of social as well as national discontentment. The sense of injustice, of inequality between the actors involved in the international system was dominant in the countries of Central and Southeastern Europe. Mitrany noticed that “The outbreak of war in 1914 found them unready . . . for this chance to try to bring the peoples of Southern Europe together. They saw it rather as a chance to multiply the world of separate nations by pressing for the break-up of the Habsburg Empire.”

Himself a member of a society which promoted a bellicose nationalist discourse, Mitrany believed that in order to avoid a new world war a league of nations had to be created, in keeping with the principles of the transfer of attributions and of equal representation. The development of the international system throughout the interwar period, the impotence and then the utter failure of the League of Nations persuaded him that the federal solution wasn’t really the most suitable or feasible one. Therefore, Mitrany hailed the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and of the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).

The interwar period and the years of the Second World War saw a wide range of regional, continental, or global federalist designs. In one way or another, they kept the nation-state at their core. A federation, in the form of a union or of a federal state, was grounded in political-constitutional principles.

David Mitrany used the document presented to the Foreign Office in 1941 as an opportunity to explain the difference between the federalist approach and the functionalist one. Federation was presented as an alternative to a League of Nations which had tried, through democratic means, to bring together several states. The main representative of this interwar trend was Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, who led the pan-European movement. According to him, the movement he had founded was not “a movement for world peace but for union, similar to the movements for German and Italian union in the nineteenth century. The movements for union were inwardly also movements for peace.” The natural question, then, was what were these movements outwardly?

In 1930, in an article suggestively entitled “Pan-Europa: A Hope or a Danger?”, Mitrany discussed for the first time the pan-European federalist plan in the form presented by Aristide Briand before the General Assembly of the League of Nations. The study in question was expanded by the author in 1975.

The first criticism of the pan-European design involved a comparison between the USA, the British Commonwealth, and the pan-European design:
The United States of America form a conscious political unit, the British Empire is held together by the bonds of common origin and tradition, but Pan-Europa has nothing very solid to build upon. The medieval sense of unity is a thing of the past; the sentiment which inspired the national movements of the last century was rather a sense of differences from immediate neighbours. To integrate these divided nations into a new continental nationalism two elements are needed above all: a sense of common danger and a sense of inner community.

In what concerns the second factor, Count Kalergi spoke about a “European race conscious of its Western nationality.” Mitrany’s opinion of Kalergi’s design was bluntly expressed in his 1965 article, in which he talked about the “aberrations of the Count Coudenhove-Kalergi.”

Mitrany returned to the contrastive analysis of federalism and functionalism in a piece published in 1948 in *International Affairs* and entitled “The Functional Approach to World Organization.” He argued that there were three main patterns for the organization of the international system: general association (the League of Nations and later the United Nations), federal union, and a system of functional arrangements. Federalism was considered to be an invention of American political theorists. Alongside the obvious advantages, the structure and the activity of a federal system included a “combination of rigidities”: the rigidity of its framework—geographic or ideological, the rigidity of its own structure, and the rigidity of life in general.

In 1948, Mitrany argued that the final outcome of economic ramification and of the ever expanding relations between nations was a world federation. In this context, he rejected the idea of regional federalism, which he saw as an argument for the new nationalism, but not for the new internationalism.

In 1965 Mitrany voiced his critical reaction to the European development after the year 1957:

“The “European” federalists have been so fascinated by a readily convenient formula that they have asked how it works where it exists, nor whether its origins bear any relation to the problem of uniting a group of states in the present social ambience.”

Mitrany’s message considered the role played by the organization of the international system when it came to the common social and economic needs of the actors involved. He indicated that the real security problem faced by all protagonists involved not only the preservation of peace between separate nations, but also their willingness to cooperate. Mitrany believed that two factors lay at the foundation of functionalist cooperation, even at world level: on the one hand, the need for a common objective and a common perspective, rooted in
social goals and policies, and, on the other hand, the need for increased similarity between the ways and the means of action. Also, the author of the 1965 study wanted to demonstrate that functionalist logic was not opposed to national feelings or to the pride in one’s sovereignty. A functionalist system is open by virtue of its own nature, its members being integrated without violent interventions upon national policies and administration. Thus, Mitrany argued that the ECSC and Euratom were “straight functional bodies,” similar to UN agencies and featuring many points of cooperation, while the EEC was an organization “with a bureaucratic tendency because it is diffuse, and an expansionist tendency because it is bureaucratic.”

Considering Mitrany’s criticism of the European construction and the intentions concerning the establishment of a political community, functionalism does not appear as a theory of European integration. He believed that regional unions are not a solution, but a transfer of problems to a higher level, as international federations create more problems than they solve. In the introduction to the fourth edition to the book that made his fame, A Working Peace System, Mitrany stated that “Sovereignty cannot . . . be transferred effectively through a formula, only through a function,” namely, through the creation of specialized agencies meant to solve the economic and social problems and meet people’s needs.

Conclusions

After the shock of the First World War, the new international system was meant to eliminate violence from the relations between states and provide international security, the outcome being the signing of the League of Nations pact. The 1930s, marked by the first crises of the international system, highlighted the vulnerabilities of the Versailles system.

Mitrany sought to explain that international peace could not be limited to preventing violence between protagonists, and that it also had to factor in the social and the economic components—essentially, the need for social unity, alongside the territorial-constitutional one. He contended that the real security issue was not the preservation of peace between separate nations, but rather the manner in which they could be persuaded to cooperate.

If we consider Mitrany’s work in its entirety, we see a development in his understanding of the organization of the international system. His intellectual and professional experiences and the opportunity to take part in the interwar theoretical debate on international relations helped him define his ideas concerning the organization of the international system.

The functionalist approach to international relations reached maturity in the work of David Mitrany. Still, the forerunners of functionalist logic are L. T.
Hobhouse, Leonard Woolf, Mary Parker Follett, G. D. H. Cole or H. Laski. David Mitrany’s contribution to the historiography of international relations was the establishment of a functional-sociological approach, in contrast to the political-constitutional one. The failure of the League of Nations to maintain peace by institutional and inter-governmental means made the theorist of functionalism consider a totally different form of international cooperation, one that was not rooted in federalist designs, but rather in the need to ensure the welfare of people. In the spirit of the British liberal pluralist school, he pleaded for international cooperation. Mitrany argued that the interdependence of nations could be established through cooperation at technical and economic level.47

The idea of international agencies also lay at the foundation of Jean Monnet’s design, which led to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and later of the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).

It was in 1965 that Mitrany first reacted to the evolution of the European construction process after 1957 and to the designs for a political union of European states. He continued to support the functionalism he had advocated two decades earlier. Mitrany rejected the solution of regionalization. On the one hand, this phenomenon limited the functional character of cooperation, and, on the other, it was nothing but a geographic expansion of national sovereignty. All of the above indicate that Mitrany’s contribution was tangential rather than direct,48 making it difficult to talk about functionalism as a theory of European integration.

Functionalism left its imprint upon the theoretical debate concerning the reorganization of the international system at the middle of the 20th century. Even through David Mitrany was an intellectual of Romanian extraction, who acknowledged the influence of his Central European experiences upon his concerns and theoretical thought, he has been ignored by the Romanian historiography of international relations. Functionalism will have to be rediscovered by Romanian theorists before they can put together a pertinent theoretical discourse detailing the Romanian perception of the process of European construction and, implicitly, of the contemporary international system.

Notes


10. Anderson, 578.

11. See Murphy, 73–90.


20. Ibid., 151–152.


25. Ibid., 115.
27. Ibid., 26–27.
35. Ibid., 35.
36. Ibid., 109.
37. Ibid., 153.
42. Mitrany, “The Prospect of Integration”, 52.
44. Mitrany, “The Prospect of Integration,” 62.
45. Ibid., 68–69.

**Abstract**

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Although an intellectual of Romanian extraction, so far David Mitrany has been largely ignored by our historiography. In the context of the new European identity of our country, it becomes even more relevant to consider the example of a thinker who quite early in this century devoted his efforts to the possible avenues of continental development. The present article discusses the main features of the theory supported and further developed by Mitrany, the so-called functionalist approach, which emerged around the middle of the century as an alternative to the federalist designs for a future international system. Mitrany’s early adversity to any form of regionalization becomes particularly relevant at a time when the European Union is faced with difficult choices concerning its own future.

**Keywords**

functionalism, federalism, international government, European integration