SPONGE

Ariel Ezrachi*

Competition law is often perceived as a stable discipline. In fact, one is often reminded that competition law must be based on economic considerations and reject any social, or political objectives. This paper argues that this appealing view – which embodies a sense of purity – is merely an illusion. This view ignores the ‘sponge-like’ characteristics of the law – its susceptibility to national peculiarities, originating in its design and evident in its application. While the idea of a stable, predictable and economically-based antitrust discipline is in all of our interests – these traits are not inherent to the law. They are forced onto the sponge in an attempt to ‘discipline’ its natural tendencies, and propagated as reality, to support legitimacy - blurring the fact that the scope and nature of modern competition laws are not necessarily as consistent and as objective as one might like them to be.

I. Introduction

When government officials argue for purity, one would expect the audience to raise a sceptical eyebrow. However, few question competition officials who, in jurisdictions outside of their own, praise the “purity” of competition law. These visitors warn the hosts of polluting competition policy with social, ethical, and moral concerns. They warn of industrial policy, regulation, and rent-seeking. After the hosts provide dinner, the competition officials leave for the airport, where they prepare the same speech for another audience. The hosts will politely agree that competition policy

* Slaughter and May Professor of Competition Law, The University of Oxford. Director, The University of Oxford Centre for Competition Law and Policy. email: ariel.ezrachi@law.ox.ac.uk.

I am grateful for comments received on earlier drafts of this paper from Maurice Stucke, Stephen Weatherill, Terry Calvani, Wouter Wils, Richard Eccles, Valentin Jeutner, Maria Ioanidou and Julian Nowag. The usual disclaimer applies— the views expressed in this paper and any errors or omissions are the author’s own.
should promote an ill-defined, open-ended goal, such as consumer welfare. But beneath this veneer, differences remain in each jurisdiction’s interests and therefore in their regulation of competition.

Different views and approaches to the application of competition laws, dependant on the interests of the enforcing jurisdiction, often transform into a ‘purity battle’- with claims that the competition analysis had been polluted and that a pure approach would have delivered an optimal result. Often, these claims accompany large transactions, state aid, and foreign jurisdictions possibly threatening the domination of national champions abroad, through enforcement of their competition laws.

This is not to say that policymakers from leading jurisdictions are disingenuous whenever making such purity arguments. A consensus exists that competition law cannot be all things to all people; a panacea for every policy concern, ranging from labour to the protection of national champions. It is therefore of little surprise that international divergence in the application and understanding of the role and limits of competition enforcement, triggers possible criticism.

While the on-going international process of assimilation and convergence of thought and policy has reduced the likelihood for ‘impurity’, it has not eliminated all friction. Even the harmonious relationship between the EU and the US, two close trading parties with an impressive track record of cooperation, displays these tensions publicly at times. Such, has been the case in the Boeing/McDonnell Douglas transaction, the Microsoft investigation and more recently the in the European Commission’s investigation of Google.

---

1 See for instance speech by R. Hewitt Pate ‘Competition and Politics’ [June 6, 2005]: ‘What is the proper role of a competition agency? I think that is easy to sum up: promoting competition. Competition enforcers need to remain narrowly focused. There is a danger in focusing within our discipline on anything other than efficiency and consumer choices in making our decisions...’ http://www.justice.gov/atr/public/speeches/210522.htm; Also note more recent discussion at the ICN on ‘Competition and Industrial Policy Considerations’. See: Newsletter from the ICN Chair, Andreas Mundt, March 2016


3 Andrew I. Gavil, Harry First The Microsoft Antitrust Cases: Competition Policy for the Twenty-first Century, 233-234; Also see: Press Release, U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Assistant
This article focuses on analytical purity and questions the presence of an objective core and a clear dividing line between competition law and external considerations. In doing so, it reflects on whether a pure form of competition enforcement exists, and considers the role of competition law as a domestic, or regional, social policy which is shaped by many forces. The article highlights the inherently dynamic nature of this legal vehicle, and as a result, its wide-ranging goals, scope and possible outcomes. It subsequently questions whether one can credibly dress competition law in an ‘objectivity cloak’ and criticise others for not conforming to given values.

It is important to stress at the outset that this article does not discount the rule of law. Competition policy should be applied consistently, objectively, accurately, and fairly. This paper underscores the merit of promoting a consistent analytical approach to competition analysis. Nor does the article question the value of ongoing international harmonisation and assimilation. The benefits of a well-defined and transparent competition law regime cannot be overstated.

The thesis put forward in this paper is more nuanced. It concerns the inherent characteristics of the law and the effect that these have on its susceptibility to a multitude of considerations. It argues that the ‘sponge-like’ characteristics of competition law make it inherently susceptible to a wide range of values and considerations. Its true scope and nature are not a ‘given’ via a consistent objective reality, but rather a complex, and at times, inconsistent, expression of many values.\(^6\)

\(^5\) ‘Sponge-like characteristics’ and the analogy to ‘sponge’ in this paper refer to ‘piece of a soft, light, porous absorbent substance originally consisting of the fibrous skeleton of an aquatic invertebrate but now usually made of synthetic material, used for washing and cleaning.’ (Oxford Dictionary)  
The article begins by considering the porous and absorbent characteristics of competition law. Following this, it explores the economic ‘membrane’ – the significant role played by economic thinking. It then reflects on the use of ‘by-pass instruments’ to tilt the balance in favour of the wider political agenda. The subsequent discussion considers the impact of this ‘enforcement platform’ on legal certainty, transparency, the international arena and legitimacy.

II. Porous and Absorbent Characteristics

When considering the scope, aim and nature of competition law, one often resorts to a description of its core goals as understood by competition enforcers, practitioners and academics. Recent globalisation of competition law enforcement, and increased assimilation between competition regimes, enable us to speak about the common ‘DNA’ of competition law – the values and characteristics which shape and influence competition law worldwide. While competition laws around the world differ in language, provisions and interpretation, they reflect large degrees of consensus on what competition law is set to achieve.

The fact that competition laws draw their core analytical framework from the same source and as a result speak an increasingly similar language, does not imply a tension free international landscape of competition enforcement. Indeed, the domestic perspective on competition enforcement, the presence of cross border externalities and transfers of wealth are only a few of the many forces which often introduce tension and inconsistency.7

This reality reflects, to some extent, the properties of the law. Being a social construct, the law stems from the domestic foundations and values of society and changes to reflect their development.8 It adapts to social

---


realism, experience and logic and will vary over time. Indeed, the validity of a legal system is embedded in society’s evolving norms of justice, morality and fairness, rather than in external presupposed norms.

Competition law is not immune to these dynamic society-driven processes. In fact, as will be illustrated below, it is inherently susceptible to a wide range of national variants. Although guided by economic analysis, one may identify distinct social, economic and political foundations which foster diversity. Different levels of economic development, market realities, government and enforcement structure all dictate differentiation in the composition of national competition provisions and their implementation.

While key competition law principles are similar across the world, these only form a skeleton and as such a theoretical ideal. The situational identity and function of the law is only revealed when embedded in the national setting. In a global setting, this constant fluidity at national level inevitably results in a heterogeneous landscape and at times blurred enforcement boundaries.

As the domestic peculiarity is embedded in the law, fragmentation should not necessarily be criticised as an improper application of competition law. Rather, it may be viewed as an undesirable inconsistency reflecting underlying conflicts between domestic realities and policies. Such inconsistency may trigger system friction and uncertainty and to that


10 See Hart (fn 5) 203–204; Also see Leslie Green comment on Hart ‘Legal Positivism’ (fn 8); Also note: Joseph Raz, The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality (Oxford University Press 2009) 39–40.


extent, should be minimised. However, it does not imply the clear presence of a superior competition enforcement model.

Anecdotal reviews of the range of values which play a part in different competition regimes illustrate the ‘porous’ nature of the law. While many jurisdictions share common core values, the full legal and policy framework around these values, their composition, interpretation and application may differ significantly. Indeed, differences exist between jurisdictions at the philosophical, political, legislative and enforcement levels.

Take for example the European Union competition regime, which pursues a multitude of different aims, including the promotion of efficiency and consumer welfare, the protection of market structure and economic freedom, and market integration.\(^\text{13}\) As stated by the European Commission: ‘...competition policy cannot be pursued in isolation, as an end in itself, without reference to the legal, economic, political and social context.’\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, the regional history affected the evolution of European competition law. For instance, its philosophical foundations were influenced, to a large extent, by the German ordo-liberal school, which reflects humanist values protecting individual freedom from governmental and private power.\(^\text{15}\) That philosophy and the unique political environment in Europe affected the EU jurisprudence, which views competition law as a tool which protects ‘not only the interests of competitors or of consumers, but also the structure of the market and, in so doing, competition as such.’\(^\text{16}\)


Indeed, EU competition law was not designed as a hermetically sealed discipline. For instance - the European market integration has been one of the major drivers of EU competition law since its inception, advancing political and economic goals, and affecting the level and nature of competition enforcement. While the European Commission alluded to the economic nature of market integration, the protection of the internal market may not always be consistent with the aim of furthering consumer welfare. In practice, this political goal has led to a focus on territorial restrictions that undermine the creation of the Single Market and dictate a rather restrictive view of vertical agreements and exclusivity arrangements. Further, competition law may be applied and developed in the light of other policy concerns such as public health, social protection, consumer protection, environmental concerns, investment, transportation, and

---

21 See, for example, Case 58/64 Consten and Grundig v Commission [1966] ECR 299.
22 Article 168(1) TFEU; Article 35 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C 364/01)
23 Article 9 TFEU refers to ‘the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health.’
24 Article 12 TFEU; Article 38 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C 364/01)
regional development. One may say that by its constitutional nature, EU competition law is mandated with sponge attributes.

The competition agenda may also face external pressure from other interest groups. Illustrative, in this context, are comments made with respect to the Commission’s merger control regime that highlight ‘the need to support competition…, while bearing in mind that many industrial sectors, such as stainless steel, operated in an environment that was becoming increasingly global, hence the importance for Community policies to actively facilitate the creation of large European groups.’

Lastly, the importance of agency design should be noted since it reflects the wider matrix in which enforcement policies are shaped. While the investigation of competition violations and recommendations are within the remit of DG Competition, the formal decision in each case is taken, not only by the competition commissioner, but by the College of 28 Commissioners, responsible for all European policies. Although this feature of governance is of limited importance in the majority of cases that do not attract the attention of a significant number of other Commissioners, it does amplify the intrinsic constitutional sponge characteristics of EU competition law. As stated by Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, ‘Competition is not a lonely portfolio.’

Significantly, the EU example is by no means unique. Other jurisdictions often take into account a wide array of considerations in the design and enforcement of competition law. Domestic culture, politics,
inequality and economic agenda are only some of the variables which affect the soul and realm of each competition regime.

For instance, United States’ federal antitrust law initially addressed powerful trusts and monopolies arising from the post-Civil War industrialization.\textsuperscript{30} Its application has been based on a range of economic approaches\textsuperscript{31} and evolving ideology. For instance, in the early days of antitrust enforcement, the antitrust provisions in the Sherman Act were used to target the victims of market power, such as union officers and unions.\textsuperscript{32} Since then, the application of the antitrust laws has evolved to reflect our more modern understanding of the aims and goals of antitrust - curtail economic injustice, promote economic liberty, and advance the consumer welfare.\textsuperscript{33}

The interpretation of the Sherman Act's antitrust provisions evolved over the years to meet dynamic economic conditions.\textsuperscript{34} The relatively abstract language enabled the court to develop and adjust the realm of antitrust law.\textsuperscript{35} Importantly, modern application of US antitrust law has been

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} David J. Gerber, \textit{Global Competition, Law, Markets and Globalization} 123 (OUP 2010)
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Note, for instance the injunction against Eugene V. Debs and the American Railway Union officers, who were ordered to cease union action that interfered with the railroads services, for the benefit of the general welfare of the nation. Also note the Danbury Hatters’ Case (\textit{Loewe v. Lawlor}) in which the Supreme Court held that labour unions were subject to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act’s prohibitions. For an overview of the early days of the Sherman Act, see: http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/tu_debs_questions.html
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Note for example comments by the Supreme Court in its Leegin Judgement
\end{itemize}
characterised by an attempt to reduce its susceptibility to non-economic considerations.\textsuperscript{36} Such approach has dominated the FTC and DOJ’s practice as they strive to foster transparency, predictability and fairness. Note, however, that this constructive approach exists within a broader legal framework which allows for the consideration of wider factors. For instance, the application of US antitrust law is limited by a number of exemptions, which carve out certain sectors and activities to various degrees.\textsuperscript{37} Also noteworthy is the U.S. Supreme Court’s ‘State-Action’ doctrine, which enables the states to consider non-competition values they deem fundamental in the operation of their markets.\textsuperscript{38} The immunity from the federal antitrust laws, despite anticompetitive effects, opens the door for consideration of industrial elements. On the role played by such considerations at state level, consider, for instance the Tesoro Corporation/BP PLC transaction which was approved subject to conditions limiting the ability of the company to lay down workers.\textsuperscript{39} The

\textsuperscript{36} Note for instance the Supreme Court Decides North Carolina State Board of Dental Examiners v. Federal Trade Commission, February 25, 2015

commitments were designed to ‘protect jobs for potentially thousands of Californians.’

Sponge-like qualities may also be observed beyond the State Action doctrine. U.S. competition scholars continue to debate the goals of U.S. competition policy. Disagreements exist between liberals and conservatives, and between progressives and libertarians over competition policy, its scope, the ability of markets to self-correct, and the sagacity of particular enforcements (or failures to enforce the competition laws). With the rise of behavioural economics, more scholars are questioning some of the basic assumptions underlying competition policy.

One well-publicized example is the issuance and subsequent withdrawal in 2009 of the DOJ report on Competition and Monopoly. The FTC did not join the report, even though it was a joint task force. The report was seen as advocating hesitancy in the application of Section 2 of the Sherman Act. As stated by Christine A. Varney, then Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Department's Antitrust Division: ‘Withdrawing the Section 2 report is a shift in philosophy and the clearest way to let everyone know that the Antitrust Division will be aggressively pursuing cases where monopolists try to use their dominance in the marketplace to stifle competition and harm consumers.’

As in other jurisdictions, the nature and intensity of US antitrust enforcement is also affected to some extent by the wider political matrix. Allocation of resources, appointment of antitrust officials and Supreme Court Justices are only some of the interfaces through which political ideology affects antitrust intervention. Also noteworthy is the possible use of lobbying and political influence to affect case selection and investigations. It has been argued that ‘the most important determinants of

---

45 Note for example the Microsoft investigation and the reported efforts by some senators to affect the FTC’s decision making. Andrew I Gavil and harry First The Microsoft Antitrust
US policy on maintaining fair market competition are political, not economic or bureaucratic. Decisions by all major US democratic institutions shape both the level and substance of US antitrust regulation through time.\textsuperscript{46}

An interesting, albeit unusual, example of the politicising of US antitrust law concerned the use of the threat of antitrust prosecution. In 1971, President Richard M. Nixon threatened the television networks ABC, NBC and CBS with an antitrust suit in order to curtail their negative media coverage. An internal White House recording of the President, which was later made public, includes comments made by him on the threat of an antitrust suit: ‘If the threat of screwing them is going to help us more with their programming than doing it, then keep the threat… Our gain is more important than the economic gain. We don’t give a goddam about the economic gain. Our game here is solely political…’\textsuperscript{47}

Beyond the EU and US, other competition regimes exhibit a similar susceptibility to domestic realities and a wide range of goals and interests that affect and shape competition policy.

For example in China, the Anti-monopoly Law advances consumer welfare and efficiency as well as the public interest and the development of a socialist market economy.\textsuperscript{48} Article 15 of the Chinese Anti Monopoly Law limits the application of the law through exemptions that apply in a range of cases.\textsuperscript{49} For instance, when an agreement has the purpose of reinforcing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized businesses, achieving public


\textsuperscript{49} Anti-Monopoly Law 2008, ss 13, 14.
interests such as conserving energy, protecting the environment and relieving the victims of a disaster, mitigating serious decrease in sales volume or excessive production during economic recessions and safeguarding the justifiable interests in foreign trade or foreign economic cooperation.\textsuperscript{50} Also noteworthy is the institutional structure in China which includes three competition agencies subrogated to the political arm and overseen by a council of high-ranking party officials.\textsuperscript{51}

In Japan, competition law promotes ‘fair and free competition, to stimulate the creative initiative of entrepreneurs, to encourage business activities, to heighten the level of employment and actual national income, and thereby to promote the democratic and wholesome development of the national economy as well as to assure the interests of general consumers’.\textsuperscript{52} In South Korea, competition law is set to encourage creative business activities, protection of consumers and promoting the balanced development of the national economy by encouraging fair and free competition.\textsuperscript{53} In Taiwan competition law seeks to maintain trading order, protect consumers’ interests, ensure fair competition, and promote economic stability and prosperity.\textsuperscript{54} In Namibia, competition law serves, among other things, to protect minority empowerment.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{50} Anti-Monopoly Law 2008, s 15.; See: Xiaoye Wang, \textit{The Evolution of China’s Anti-Monopoly Law} (Edward Elgar Publishing 2014); H Stephen Harris, \textit{Anti-Monopoly Law and Practice in China} (OUP 2011) 85.
\item\textsuperscript{51} Xiaoye Wang and Adrian Emch ‘Five years of implementation of China’s Anti-Monopoly Law—achievements and challenges’ \textit{J Antitrust Enforcement} (2013) 1 (2): 247-271
\item\textsuperscript{52} The Antimonopoly Act (JP), Article 1.
\item\textsuperscript{53} Monopoly Regulation and Fair Trade Act (MRFT) Article 1; Meong-Cho Yang, ‘Competition Law and Policy of the Republic of Korea’ (2009) 54 Antitrust Bulletin 621, 624-625.
\item\textsuperscript{54} Fair Trade Act 2011, Article 1.
\item\textsuperscript{55} Competition Act 2003 (No.2 of 2003). The purpose of the Act is, \textit{inter alia}, stated at section 2(f) to be to ‘promote a greater spread of ownership, in particular to increase ownership stakes of historically disadvantaged persons.’ ‘Historically disadvantaged persons’ are described in the Act at section 1 as ‘persons who have been socially, economically or educationally disadvantaged by past discriminatory laws or practices.’ In terms of substantive law, section 28(2) allows exemption from the application of the Act for restrictive practices which fall under a ‘public policy’ exception. At section 28(3)(b) it is further explained that when making this decision for an exemption under public policy the Commission must consider whether the agreement, decision or concerted practice results in ‘enabling small undertakings owned or controlled by historically disadvantaged persons, to become competitive.’
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
or public interest.\textsuperscript{56} In Hong Kong, exclusions and exemptions are listed in the Competition Ordinance. They narrow the application of competition law in a range of instances, including general economic interest, public policy grounds or in the case of statutory bodies.\textsuperscript{57} In Russia, the Federal Antimonopoly Service is responsible for the regulation of unfair competition and consumer protection, regulation of financial organisations and the granting of state preferences. State preferences can be granted exclusively for the purpose of advancing education and science, protection of the environment and protecting citizens’ health.\textsuperscript{58}

In the United Kingdom, consideration of ‘public interest’ enables the Secretary of State for Business and Enterprise to clear a merger despite competitive concerns.\textsuperscript{59} Most noticeably, that benchmark was used to clear a merger transaction between \textit{Lloyds/HBOS} which was deemed essential to ensuring the stability of the UK financial system.\textsuperscript{60} In Germany, ministerial approval may be used to override the competition authority decision making.\textsuperscript{61} Under this overriding public interest provision, the minister may consider wider policy concerns and advantages to the economy as a whole. For instance, in the \textit{E.ON/Ruhrgas} transaction, public interest considerations led the Minister for Economics to set aside a Bundeskartellamt prohibition decision.\textsuperscript{62} The transaction was cleared, as it was deemed necessary for the

\textsuperscript{57} Competition Ordinance, ss 9, 24. Draft Guidelines on Applications for a Decision under Sections 9 and 24 (Exclusions and Exemptions) and section 15 Block Exemption Orders were published in 2014.
\textsuperscript{59} Enterprise Act 2002, s 45.
\textsuperscript{60} Decision by Lord Mandelson, the Secretary of State for Business, not to refer to the Competition Commission the merger between Lloyds TSB Group plc and HBOS plc under Section 45 of the Enterprise Act 2002 (31 October 2008). A challenge to the legality of the decision was subsequently dismissed by the Competition Appeal Tribunal: 1107/4/10/08 \textit{Merger Action Group v Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform} [2008] CAT 36 (10 December 2008). This was despite competitive concerns identified by the Office of Fair Trading in \textit{Anticipated acquisition by Lloyds TSB plc of HBOS plc: Report to the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform} (24 October 2008) 27–58. See also Leela Cejnar and Arlen Duke, ‘Competition Policy and the Banking Sector: The need for greater international co-operation’ (2013) 34 No. 11 European Competition Law Review 584.
\textsuperscript{61} § 42 des deutschen Gesetzes gegen Wettbewerbsbeschränkungen (GWB)
stability of the national gas supply and would have improved E.ON’s international competitiveness.63

In South Africa, public interest grounds – including the impact on particular industrial sectors or regions, employment, and the ability of national industries to compete in international markets – play a role in the appraisal of merger transactions.64 This test, which explicitly introduces industrial policy considerations into the analysis, may be used to block pro-competitive mergers or approve harmful ones.65 Coupled with the lack of independence of the South African competition authorities, it has attracted concerns as to the scope and limits of competition analysis.66

These examples highlight the ‘sponge’ properties of competition law. The ability to stretch or narrow its application and harness it, at times, to protect a wide range of social goals. They illustrate the possible ‘instrumentalisation’ of competition law – advancing goals which may go beyond the competitive process as understood by many. When coupled with politically dependent enforcement structures, the ‘sponge’ may well become arbitrary and less predictable.

Often, these sponge qualities remain below our collective radar. However, when one is confronted with parallel enforcement and possible conflicts between jurisdictions, we recall this peculiarity. We treat it as an

64 Competition Act 1998 (Act No. 89 of 1998) (SA), s16. Such for example was the case in Metropolitan Holdings Ltd v Momentum Group Ltd (41/LM/Jul10) [2010] ZACT 87 (9 December 2010), para 69; Also see Wal-Mart Stores Inc. v Massmart Holdings Limited (73/LM/Dec10) [2011] ZACT 42 (29 June 2011) where the merger was approved by the Competition Tribunal subject to certain conditions, including that the merged entity must: ensure there are no retrenchments as a result of the merger for a period of two years; continue to honour existing labour agreements; and establish a programme aimed exclusively at the development of local South African suppliers, including small, micro and medium enterprises, funded to the value of R100 million. The amount was increased to R200 million by the Competition Appeal Court: Minister of Economic Developments and Others v Competition Tribunal and Others, SACCWU v Walmart (110/CAC/Jun11, 111/CAC/Jun11) [2012] ZACAC 6 (9 October 2012), para 43.
66 Id
abnormal outcome of the analysis, opting to ignore it being intrinsic to the fabric of competition enforcement.

III. Economic ‘Membrane’

The discussion above illustrates that while sharing the same basic properties, competition laws around the world, being rooted in the domestic landscapes, echo a wide range of interests and enforcement philosophies.

In a quest to limit the sponge-like characteristics of competition law, one naturally looks for a constant benchmark which may provide a stabilising effect and a focal point for antitrust enforcement. That benchmark, not surprisingly, has been shaped by economic thinking which provides insights as to welfare effects and the adequate level of intervention. With the ‘sponge’ analysis in mind, one may view the economic discipline as a ‘membrane’ which surrounds the ‘sponge’ and limits its absorption properties. As such, it prevents it from ‘over absorbing’ values and goals which are inconsistent with economic thinking. In doing so it helps stabilise the ‘sponge’ by limiting and slowing its absorbency rate.

It is widely accepted that economics play a central and crucial role in shaping competition enforcement and intervention.67 The centrality of economic analysis is acknowledged in all competition jurisdictions and results in an ever increasing ‘economisation’ of antitrust enforcement.68 Visibly, the emphasis on economic analysis has led to institutionalisation at the enforcement level, with increased investment in analytical capacity and recruitment of economic experts.69 As noted by Chief Judge Posner:

---

‘almost everyone professionally involved in antitrust today - whether as litigator, prosecutor, judge, academic, or informed observer – not only agrees that the only goal of antitrust laws should be to promote economic welfare, but also agrees on the essential tenets of economic theory that should be used to determine the consistency of specific business practices with that goal.’

In an ideal world, one could imagine a well-defined universal economic ‘membrane’ that regulates the diffusion of external values into the ‘sponge’. Unfortunately, reality is less impressive. The economic ‘membrane’ is not always clearly defined and it is subjected to internal expansion and change. In some ways, like the ‘sponge’, it derives part of its identity from its surrounding environment.

Several forces may impact on the stability of the ‘membrane’ and its ability to regulate the inflow of variants into the ‘sponge’. To begin with, economics theory in and of itself is not monolithic. While neoclassical economics is often presented as the only strand of economic theory, it is one of several perspectives. One may identify several strands of economic theory, including: Austrian, Behaviourist, Classical, Developmentalist, Institutionalist, Keynesian, Marxist, Neoclassical and Schumpeterian. Naturally, the divergence in strands of theory affects one’s perception of the competitive process, the relevant competition forces, one’s assumptions

---

70 Richard A Posner, Antitrust Law (2nd ed, University of Chicago Press 2001); Note comments by Stucke who argues that the ‘U.S. antitrust community never agreed that antitrust’s goals were only economic or that antitrust only had one goal – to promote economic welfare…’ Maurice E Stucke, ‘Reconsidering Antitrust’s Goals’ (2012) 53 Boston College Law Review 551, 564.


74 For example, Static v. Dynamic forces (evolutionary economic theory); For an in-depth description of evolutionary economics see Richard R Nelson and Sidney G Winter, An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change (Harvard University Press 1982).
regarding market participants, and the role of institutions in antitrust enforcement.

Even if one endorses neoclassical economics as the leading strand, the dynamic nature of economic thinking and its susceptibility to change should be acknowledged. As put by Stucke: ‘[u]ltimately economics is not a value-free science, inoculated from normative judgments. Thus, any competition policy in a world with humans, transaction costs, coercion, and informational asymmetries is built on the normative judgments of legal and informal institutions.’ Indeed, a given underlying economic analysis may evolve when it is embedded in a different context and market reality. In fact, it may be viewed as a narrow strand of industrial policy, driven by economic rationale. Its interface with the ‘sponge’ reflects one choice among a spectrum of such policies.

Furthermore, while neoclassical economic terminology provides for a seemingly homogeneous benchmark worldwide - that language similarity may be misleading. The scope and meaning of some of the terms used in economic analysis may differ and are context dependent. For instance, the concept of ‘consumer welfare’, which is universally referred to as a leading benchmark, does not embody universally agreed properties. Differences emerge as to the exact composition of the term and the means of achieving it. As commented by Werden: ‘Every favoured policy is said to promote

---


‘consumer welfare’... But the superficial consensus on this point masks a deep disagreement about what ‘consumer welfare’ means and especially about what policies best to promote it.78 Similarly, the measurement of welfare in competition law has also been the subject of varying approaches, from the protection of total welfare,79 to a focus on consumer surplus.80 The concept of efficiency, which dominates our terminology, triggers similar ambiguity.81 It is used universally, despite limited consensus as to its meaning, thus portraying an impression of conformity.

Another challenge that may affect the role played by the economic ‘membrane’, relates to the assumptions at the base of the analysis. Even if one assumes a single neoclassical economic approach and clear terminology, the economic modelling is rooted in the assumption of rationality and utility maximisation. That assumption has been challenged in several interdisciplinary economic fields.82 Most notably, behavioural economics literature illustrates the limits of rationality and predictability.

The conceptual challenges described so far are joined by a practical challenge, evident on a case by case level. Even if one assumes a stable and predictable economic discipline, this stability is often shaken once applied to specific cases. In court, it is common for economic experts, utilising the same principles, to present opposing interpretations – different theories of harm and different welfare outcomes. Indeed, it is often the case that each

---

80 For example: Salop (Id); Motta Competition Policy 18
economic expert would display ‘a tendency to become an advocate for the party by which he was instructed.’

From the definition of a market, through the consideration of market power, to the analysis of market dynamics, innovation and behaviour - the transition from economic theory to practice is often imprecise. While the use of proxies is a necessity, its inexact nature and susceptibility to subjective interpretation should be acknowledged. Take for example the traditional definition of the relevant market and the assumption of a boundary of competition. The excessive, and at times, fictional, simplicity of traditional analysis has long been acknowledged. Indeed, one may witness a de-emphasis on market definition in favour of a focus on competitive pressures. Similarly, consider the approximation of market power. The term has been used loosely to describe a wide range of powers, from monopoly to lesser market presence. Its assessment is subjected to numerous assumptions as to market dynamics, barriers to entry and behaviour of economic actors.

To remedy possible imprecisions, one often employs complex economic analysis and modelling to provide insights into market dynamics and welfare outcomes. Naturally, these models do not portray facts, but predict an outcome based on partial resemblance to the market. The accuracy of the approximation heavily depends on the available data and the accuracy and relevance of the base assumptions. A disparity between theory and fact may lead to misleading conclusions. As put by Bishop: ‘It is

---

83 Justice Peter Roth commenting on the diverging views presented by economic experts as part of a hot-tub process conducted in the Streetmap v Google hearing. Paragraph 47, Streetmap v Google [2016] EWHC 253 (England and Wales High Court (Chancery Division))
87 On the limitation of economic analysis see: Wouter P.J. Wils ‘The judgment of the EU General Court in Intel and the so-called ‘more economic approach’ to abuse of dominance [2014] 37 World Competition 4.
88 Gunnar Niels, ‘The Economist in Court: Guilty of Theories that don’t fit the facts’ (2007) 6 Competition Law Review 358; Simon Bishop (Id)
one thing to devise a theoretical economic model that produces a particular prediction and quite another to understand whether that same model has any practical relevance for the actual case in hand.\textsuperscript{89}

A related challenge concerns the ability to accurately predict behaviour and competitive outcomes in dynamic and complex markets.\textsuperscript{90} For instance, technology markets have long been characterised by rapid changes to competition, resources, data usage, products and demand characteristics. Industry evolution and competition on these markets is constantly redefined and may be difficult to capture and predict through static analysis.\textsuperscript{91}

Another challenge concerns the capacity of the judiciary to properly assess and digest complex and evolving theories when considering antitrust cases.\textsuperscript{92} While some jurisdictions benefit from experienced and dedicated competition courts, others may not. The disparity between the court’s capacity and economic complexity increases the likelihood for mistakes and error costs.\textsuperscript{93} The difficulty associated with understanding the economic analysis leads, at times, to over simplification, the discounting of base assumptions and the overlooking of market peculiarities. In those instances, the economic ‘membrane’ provides nothing but a false sense of accuracy and stability. It is perhaps not surprising that when overwhelmed with economic complexity, some courts have been known to favour a procedural route - resolving a case on technicality - thus avoiding the pitfalls of complex econometric analysis.

It is important to nuance the argument put forward in this section; economics is central to antitrust analysis – that proposition is not contested. Its significance to enforcement and policy cannot be overstated. Indeed, it will often provide predictable, consistent and applicable benchmarks for assessment. The ‘economisation’ of competition law provides a valuable common benchmark for enforcement and, while not monolithic, it does put

\textsuperscript{89} Simon Bishop (Id).
forward a body of accepted principles. True, different terms and different approaches may lead to a range of outcomes, yet these are by large within the acceptable spectrum and would not give rise to inconsistency in the majority of cases.

Taking these caveats into account, the discussion above should be understood as not challenging - the validity or necessity of economics, but rather the assumed stability and clear scope of the economic envelope. That envelope will not always lead to a single correct outcome, and subsequently, its ability to restrain the sponge-like characteristics of competition law should not be assumed. Importantly, ill perceived stability and predictability of the economic ‘membrane’, which ignores its imprecise nature, could result in over confidence, government failure and high error costs.

IV. External Bypasses

A state may legitimately favour other enforcement or regulatory vehicles over competition law when dealing with distinct industries or markets. Similarly, it may find it desirable to exclude certain sectors from the realm of competition law. Such means may be viewed as ‘external peripheral bypasses’ that divert the subject matter away from competition analysis, or limit its scope. At times, these tools may enable a state to advance public interest or industrial policies which would otherwise not fit within the ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ framework.

For instance, states may exclude certain organs and industries from the realm of competition law. An example of this is the Hong Kong Competition Ordinance that exempts statutory bodies from competition rules.94 Over 160 statutory bodies, in charge, among others, of airports, broadcasting and housing, are excluded from the application of the law.95 Similarly, in Japan, the Antimonopoly Act exempts national monopolies relating to ‘railways, electricity, gas or any other business constituting a monopoly by the inherent nature of the said business’.96 In the US, the limitations on the application of antitrust laws to agriculture, insurance and

94 Competition Ordinance, s 3 (1).
95 http://www.info.gov.hk/cml/eng/cbc/index1j.htm
96 Antimonopoly Act, Article 21.
the baseball league are noticeable. Indeed, most jurisdictions will implement some level of limitation through the provision of peripheral bypasses.

Other bypasses may be triggered when national interests are at stake. In Germany, public interest considerations enable the Minister for Economics to bypass the Bundeskartellamt decision making. Notable is the 

\textit{E.ON/Ruhrgas} transaction, mentioned earlier above, which was deemed necessary for the stability of the national gas supply.\footnote{Federal Baseball Club v National League, 259 US 200 (1922), where it was held by the US Supreme Court that baseball was not interstate commerce for the purposes of the Sherman Act.} A similar mechanism was activated in Israel to approve a major gas deal. There, the Prime Minister, acting as the Minister of the Economy, made use of Article 52 of the Israeli Antitrust Law which stipulates that overarching national security and foreign policy considerations may allow bypassing the decision making powers of the Antitrust Authority. The gas deal was approved, despite opposition from the Antitrust Authority which warned of its harmful effect on consumer welfare.\footnote{N 61 above.}

At times, bypasses may be tailored to a specific sector, brought forward by legislators (and lobbyists) to circumvent a decision of the Competition Agency. Illustrative, is the French legislator’s ban on parity clauses in contracts between price comparison websites and hotels in the French hotel sector. The legislation overrode an earlier decision by the French Competition Agency which found narrow parity clauses to be welfare enhancing.\footnote{http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/netanyahu-signing-article-52-petitions-opposition-israel-27193; http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/knesset-committee-recomends-pm-netanyahu-israel-antitrust-authority-27118; http://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Antitrust-Commissioner-David-Gilo-to-resign-in-August-amid-gas-disputes-404017}

Some sectors may be taken out of competition analysis through the use of specific regulatory means. For instance, in Canada the ‘Regulated Conduct Defence’ limits the scope for the application of competition law in

\footnote{Ariel Ezrachi ‘The Competitive Effects of Parity Clauses on Online Commerce’ [2016] European Competition Journal}
regulated sectors. In the US, the insurance sector is exempted from the application of antitrust law to the extent that it is regulated by states.

The relationship between regulated industries and competition enforcement has been explored extensively. The availability of an industry regulatory regime is seen at times as tilting the balance against antitrust intervention in that sphere, thus creating an ‘organic’ bypass. As held by Justice Scalia in the Trinko judgement, the benefit of antitrust intervention is minimal where a regulatory structure designed to deter and remedy anticompetitive harm exists. The slight benefits of antitrust intervention are outweighed by the likely costs, enforcement errors and the risk of chilling competition. A different approach would see the two as complementary instruments. In the UK, for example, sector regulators are empowered with concurrent jurisdiction to apply competition law alongside the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).


102 N 36 above

103 ICN (n 95 above); Alexandre de Steel, ‘The Relationship between Competition Law and Sector Specific Regulation: The Case of Electronic Communications’ (2008) 47 Reflets & Perspectives de la vie economique 55.


105 Contrast the ex-post application of EU competition law to a market which was subjected to ex-ante regulation, with the US Supreme Court non-interventionist approach: Case C-280/08 P Deutsche Telekom AG v Commission Court of Justice [2010] 5 CMLR 27. For comment on the intersection between competition law and sector regulation in the telecommunications industry see Pierre-André Buiges and Patrick Rey (eds), The Economics of Antitrust and Regulation in Telecommunications: Perspectives for the New European Regulatory Framework (Edward Elgar Publishing 2004)

106 Ofcom, Ofgem, Ofwat, Office of Rail Regulation, Civil Aviation Authority, Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

Another bypass route concerns the limitation of jurisdiction to certain anticompetitive activities. Notable in this respect are exemptions of export cartels from domestic competition law. These cartels typically target foreign markets without generating domestic anticompetitive effects. Several jurisdictions have adopted formal exemptions taking these arrangements outside domestic authority. Others lack jurisdiction due to their substantive provisions that focus on domestic anticompetitive effects, thus implicitly exempting these activities. In both cases, when faced with welfare loss which is externalised on other jurisdictions, competition scrutiny is not triggered and the domestic regime will take no action against the anticompetitive activity.

All in all, external bypasses may echo domestic preferences by creating parallel or alternative mechanisms which advance domestic interests. Note that external bypasses are triggered before the competition analysis, and as such do not affect the perceived scope of the ‘sponge’. They therefore escape direct criticism of their role in politicising and skewing the competition process. Yet in essence, they may provide for a similar outcome.

On the one hand, the exclusion from a transparent and structured competition analysis may expose these alternative vehicles to even greater political susceptibility and open the door, at times, to corruption and misuse. On the other hand, transparent bypasses may offer a clear and legitimate vehicle to advance public policy objectives. The separate treatment of these objectives, outside the competition law analysis, may assist in consideration of the costs and trade-offs of different public objectives, one of which may be competition law.

Importantly, these bypasses reflect social and political preferences. While they may be viewed as external to the competition analysis – they in fact limit its scope and influence. The sense of purity which they bestow on the antitrust community should not mask the distorting effect they have on

---

the outcome of analysis. With that in mind, one may question the true primacy of antitrust law – even in jurisdictions which champion it.109

V. Legal Certainty

The desire for a well-defined and consistent legal and analytical framework leaves one slightly uncomfortable when faced with the ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ analogy. Naturally, we prefer to work in a predictable environment and to act as advocates of a clear and well defined discipline. Indeed, the antitrust community has limited tolerance to such chatter – preferring to view each deviation as an anomaly. However, understanding the ‘sponge’ properties of competition law provides valuable insights to the scope and limits of competition law.

To begin with, the potential burden of the ‘sponge’ properties should not mask their compatibility with the dynamic nature of the law. To the extent that such dynamism does not override predictability, transparency and objectivity, it may prove beneficial. To that extent, consistency should not be viewed as an overriding legal value.110 As noted by Justice Kennedy, in the Leegin Judgement, while antitrust jurisprudence is not written on a clean slate the ‘Court should be cautious about putting dispositive weight on doctrines from antiquity but of slight relevance.’111 Dynamism enables competition law to address a wide range of market and social realities, while retaining its conceptual core. As such it safeguards competition law from turning into a closed system, irrelevant to domestic needs. It provides a reflection of the changing political landscape and forms part of the democratic process. In addition, the analytical elasticity allows enforcers to experiment with ranging levels of intervention, remedies and enforcement tools. The ‘sponge’ properties may, for instance, allow a competition agency to address market failures or a period of crisis by relaxing the analytical framework and allowing for a wider scope of considerations to direct the level and scope of intervention.

109 Note for instance Newsletter from the ICN Chair – March 2016 on ‘Competition and Industrial Policy Considerations’ which reported on efforts to limit these considerations.
111 Leegin Creative Leather Products, Inc (No. 06-480, Supreme Court Of The United States) June 28, 2007.
Having acknowledged the benefits of the ‘sponge’ properties, one should be wary of the possible welfare costs. The most notable consequence of the ‘sponge’ properties concerns the ability of market participants to assess the likely outcome of antitrust scrutiny and the boundaries of legality. Beyond the clear approach to pro-competitive action or hard-core restriction, one may face considerable uncertainty. With so many moving parts and variants, the predictability of competition analysis may be undermined and lead to welfare loss. Arguably, that predictability is further undermined in today’s antitrust landscape which has been dominated by technical experts, expert lawyers and skillful economists with the power to advance selective goals. Overall, the fluid nature of the ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ and the possibility for them to generate a wide range of outcomes to a given scenario may open the way for opportunism.

The ‘sponge’ properties not only affect the analytical framework, but also impact on enforcement policies. The way one understands competition law and its goals is naturally linked to one’s approach to selection of cases and remedies. Areas affected may include case selection and prioritisation, allocating budget, investment in capacity building, advocacy or case investigation.

Further, agency design and allocation of functions may affect the intensity of enforcement. An agency’s approach may vary based on the

---


range of goals and interests it protects. Functions may include, for example, competition enforcement, consumer protection, regulation of sectors, data protection, protection of intellectual property rights and monitoring of public procurement. The amalgamation of tasks creates a ‘policy conglomerate’ and affects the agency’s definition of goals, prioritisation and performance.\textsuperscript{118} It may thus affect the absorbent properties of the ‘sponge’ and its usage.

Arguably, it is in the enforcer’s interest to stabilise the ‘sponge’ characteristics and foster a predictable analytical framework. That indeed has been the case in many jurisdictions. However, the difficulty with ‘self-policing’ by the enforcer is that it relies on an unpredictable safety valve. Different enforcers may exhibit ranging levels of expertise and independence. Imprecise analysis, balanced through the enforcer’s self-restraint, is in itself a recipe for unpredictability. In such cases the level of enforcement becomes overly dependent on the individual and subsequently exposed to its personal agenda, to agency-problems and externalities. At the extreme, the imprecise analytical framework may open the door to ‘reverse reasoning’ – allowing one to identify the target and outcome, and only subsequently construct the reasoning to support it. Such an arbitrary approach, even when shielded by complex reasoning, is detrimental to the integrity of the analytical process. It creates a subjectively driven inquiry in which the individuals on both sides, and the interaction between them, set the tone for the analysis and determine its outcome.

VI. Legitimacy

An interesting question raised by the ‘sponge’ analogy concerns the legitimacy of competition regimes worldwide. One may wonder the extent to which competition law, as one or many understand it, reflects a superior benchmark for other jurisdictions to follow. Can one jurisdiction legitimately criticise another for opting for a different composition of values?

While leading western authorities may view other regimes as diverting from the acceptable template, the ‘sponge’ analogy tells a more

complex story. Those ‘other’ regimes do not necessarily divert from a well-defined and superior template but rather divert from the state of play in another jurisdiction - which may well reflect the development and absorption properties in that jurisdiction. This insight affects the authority with which one may delegitimise other regimes.

Of course, this is not to suggest that competition law ought to be accepted as an instrumental platform advancing industrial policies. It does however remind one that, by its nature, the ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ are dynamic and embedded in the domestic context. The goals and values of competition enforcement and the hierarchy between them are not set. A purist approach is often rooted in one’s misguided perception as to the susceptibility of its own regime to these forces.

Even when a jurisdiction heavily relies on economic thinking in case analysis, this does not imply that ‘economics’ equates to the ‘law’. The realm and scope of competition law are set and affected by the legislative process and political forces, some visible through ‘bypasses’ while others less so. While the competition analysis may be economic in nature, it is confined by legislative and domestic boundaries. In other words, the economic display may be central to the analysis, yet the totality of the intervention is likely to echo domestic peculiarities. In addition, recall the dynamic nature of economic thinking, its evolution over time and susceptibility to social, political and moral norms. All in all, economic analysis ought to guide the discussion, but should not be mistaken to represent the whole, rather than one of its parts.

Linked to the legitimacy debate are institutional choices and agency designs, which may amplify the ‘sponge’ characteristics. Most notably, the link between the enforcer and the political arm may increase emphasis on wider industrial policies, fostering uncertainty and an arbitrary environment. On this point, note that the further one ventures from the core values of competition law, the easier it may be for special interest groups to affect the analysis.

When considering the legitimacy of the enforcement environment one should also be mindful of the scope of admissible evidence and considerations. The ability of parties to present industrial, political, social considerations at trial or hearing may inevitably lead to ‘instrumentalisation’ of the process, even when the process is conducted openly and is subjected to checks and balances. An alternative approach which de-politicises the
process would reject such considerations, treating them as irrelevant. Such a purist approach is naturally perceived as more accurate and focused on the core goals of competition law. Recall however that industrial, political, and social considerations may affect the legislative process, the enforcement priorities, allocation of resources, susceptibility to lobbying and many other dimensions, while retaining a purist front at the trial or hearing. A consideration of a regime’s position on the spectrum of real, and perceived, purity should be conducted while taking the whole echo system into account.

VII. International Arena

Embedding the ‘sponge’ in a global environment of plural sovereignties, amplifies many of the challenges discussed above. With more than 120 competition regimes worldwide and ever increasing cross border business activity, the prospect for inconsistency and system friction is apparent. Addressing this multitude and friction has been the focal point of recent decades - from early unilateral policies, through enhanced bilateral cooperation, regional and multinational negotiations.

Much has been written about the internationalisation of competition law and the means to enhance harmonisation and convergence. With the ‘sponge’ analogy in mind, a number of insights are worth mentioning.

First, the proliferation of competition regimes has been celebrated as a move toward a more competitive international landscape. Indeed, many jurisdictions and international organisations have been supporting the emergence of new competition regimes. The promotion of antitrust around the world has undoubtedly been a worthwhile goal. Interestingly, while ‘bundles’ of ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ resemble each other on the ‘factory floor’, they are dynamic in nature and mutate once immersed in their unique domestic reality. One should therefore not be surprised when the ‘successful export’ of a ‘sponge’ into a foreign jurisdiction results in differences and inconsistencies. The drive toward competition homogeneity does not override the domestic reality. Accordingly, the full composition of the ‘sponge’ is only revealed once immersed in the national matrix.

Second, the ‘sponge’ properties should be acknowledged when faced with inconsistency in the application of competition law by one or more jurisdictions. An ‘ideal of purity’ is at best naïve and should not be used as a benchmark against which other regimes are condemned. A more
intellectually honest approach would accept the properties of the ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ while highlighting the desire for coherence and transparency at domestic and international levels. Such an approach does not imply an acceptance of possible politicisation or instrumentalisation of competition analysis. It merely implies a more honest discussion when criticising other jurisdictions’ composition of values.

Indeed, if one observes how competition law enforcement has developed over the past century, an evolving journey emerges. At different stages of economic development and political circumstances, different jurisdictions used competition enforcement to advance varied goals. Such development is consistent with ‘sponge’ properties and raises questions as to one’s ability to credibly push another to align its policies to a superior universal template. Furthermore, the mere transplantation of legal text - from one jurisdiction to another - may provide for perceived assimilation but offer less in terms of substantive alignment. In fact, the commonality and similar lingo used by competition officials, which are of course of significant value, may disguise the true domestic nature of competition law and its inherent characteristics.

Further, the notion that uninterrupted competitive pressure serves as the optimal solution to enhance welfare and market mechanism, has to be considered in context. Indeed, different cultural, economic, social and political circumstances may impact on the effectiveness of competition policies and result in heterogeneous enforcement landscape. The promotion of a certain enforcement agenda, as attractive and helpful as it may be to one jurisdiction, may form the wrong cure to another. It is rooted in a belief of universality which is inconsistent with the sponge properties. It ignores the possibility that, over time, policy makers may have been


120 Note, for instance, how in some jurisdictions moral norms and religion may undermine the effectiveness of leniency programmes. When local culture condemns the reporting of the violator to the competition agency, formal adoption of such programmes may yield limited results. See: Julián Peña ‘The Limits of Competition Law in Latin America’ in Lianos, Ioannis and Sokol, Daniel (editors) The Limits of Competition Law (2012 Stanford University Press); Anecdotal evidence suggests that resistance to leniency due to cultural and religious values, led in some jurisdictions to the majority of applications being submitted by foreign companies, with limited cooperation from domestic enterprises.
intellectually captured by different ideas and pressure groups rather than by an objective truth. It also ignores the fact that substantive analysis forms part of a wide legal matrix of exclusions and bypasses. Accordingly, a jurisdiction’s analytical approach promoted worldwide, might not be as pure as perceived.

Of course, these insights should not mask the risk of misusing competition law to advance industrial policies. The sponge characteristics may allow jurisdictions to advance political agenda and protectionist policies in the disguise of competition enforcement, thus bypassing the scrutiny of international trade agreements. Such misuse has sometimes led to political friction between jurisdictions, in particular when appraising cross border merger transactions.\(^{121}\) It may allow a jurisdiction to block beneficial foreign transactions, due to negative, non-competitive effects on the domestic market. It may also serve as a tool to establish ‘royalty payments’ and ‘positive transfer of wealth’ as a condition for clearing a transaction. Conflicts posed by the increased volume of transnational enforcement may lead to delays and inconsistencies, and in sensitive cases - to political friction.

To illustrate the potential for system friction, take for example the alleged misuse of Chinese competition law to block Coca-Cola’s bid for China Huiyuan Juice Group Ltd. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce decision has been seen by some as advancing protectionist domestic industrial and political considerations disguised as competition appraisal.\(^{122}\) Without taking a stance on this specific case, one could nonetheless appreciate the wide margin for decision making offered by the sponge. Such a margin may enable bypassing international agreements by embedding political considerations into the sponge and using competition law as a façade for protectionist policies. Such instances highlight the significance of international efforts to foster transparent and predictable competition

---


principles. They should serve to promote more consistent appraisal benchmarks that would safeguard the rule of law.

Another insight concerns the limitations of antitrust imperialism. As noted earlier, the valuable convergence toward an agreed spectrum of goals and the use of similar language in competition regimes worldwide does not imply the presence of a unified and consistent platform. The ongoing worldwide assimilation of competition law analysis does not override the ‘sponge’ properties. It merely reflects successful attempts to tame and align regimes worldwide through unilateral and collaborative means. Accordingly, to a large extent multinational and regional negotiations may be viewed as external pressures which limit the natural properties of the ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’. Their legitimacy is external and not necessarily rooted in the presence of purity within the ‘sponge’. They stem from the desire to limit system friction and enhance consistency in the application and enforcement of competition law worldwide. The choice of an agreed benchmark is often the result of international negotiation, political pressure and compromise by the weaker participants. In other words, ‘purity’ is often moulded in accordance to the dominant jurisdictions’ view point. Accordingly, worldwide assimilation should not be confused, with the presence of a single superior enforcement or analytical framework. Indeed, in the context of multinational efforts, one should recall that unity is often a hegemonic project - transforming the strongest power’s own perspective into the unified benchmark.123

A further insight concerns the areas of competition law that are best suited for negotiation and convergence. Some areas of the ‘sponge’ may be predisposed to domestic, social and political surroundings, while others may be more resistant to domestic effects. For instance, secondary provisions – often procedural in nature – tend to be less susceptible to wider domestic interests and as such form better candidates for wide multinational convergence. Indeed, harmonisation of procedural provisions has been a prime target for successful multinational collaboration. Noteworthy in this respect is the ICN’s contribution to the assimilation of merger notification regimes124 and the increase of the nexus between the reviewing jurisdiction

and the transactions.\textsuperscript{125} Also noteworthy are the OECD’s contribution to convergence in merger control,\textsuperscript{126} and UNCTAD’s work through the Competition and Consumer Protection for Latin America programme and its voluntary merger notification programme.\textsuperscript{127}

Other areas which are more domestically sensitive have proved more difficult for alignment. They display resistance to binding frameworks and limited alignment with voluntary ones. Past attempts that ignored the ‘sponge’ characteristics and pushed for overreaching binding multinational agreements have failed. Indeed, from the Havana Charter\textsuperscript{128} to the Munich group initiative\textsuperscript{129} and attempts at the World Trade Organisation,\textsuperscript{130} the international community was unable to reach meaningful binding agreements on competition law and policy. By contrast, voluntary frameworks have been more successful in promoting selective convergence.

Related is the significance of similarity of domestic environments in achieving international consensus. Similar market, social and political realities present corresponding environments which subsequently lead to similar ‘sponge’ and ‘membrane’ compositions. Indeed, one can observe the parallels in enforcement and policy between developing countries, and differences in approach to developed countries. These realities explain the


selective investment in high impact bilateral agreements which often link jurisdictions which share similarities in trade patterns and enforcement. They may also shed light on the negative correlation between the number of jurisdictions involved in negotiation, and the binding nature and scope of the provisions agreed.

VIII. Conclusion

The ‘sponge’ analogy implies that competition policy is more flexible than some might argue. It acknowledges that the effects of the domestic environment are an integral part of competition law and are echoed in the properties of the law. In doing so it points to the margin for subjective, or at times, arbitrary decision making that may be shielded under the perceived structure of the law and the legitimacy of economic analysis.

So where does it leave us? Importantly, this paper does not seek to promote the sponginess of competition law. It merely describes its characteristics - its state of being. Similarly, the paper does not set out to challenge the overall benefits that stem from antitrust intervention. It does, however, question the conviction with which one portrays it as a solid discipline with apparent outcomes. As idyllic as such view may be, it often leads to a shallow and an over polarised debate at national and international levels. It stands in contrast to the true nature of the ‘sponge’ and to reality, as experienced daily by competition lawyers, enforcers, judges, policy makers and businessmen. The key to effective competition law enforcement is not in the pretense of purity but in the understanding of the interface between the ‘sponge’, ‘membrane’ and the domestic environment, and in a credible move to enhance its transparency, limit its susceptibility and promote a workable rule of law. The reflective approach put forward in this paper should not challenge the rationale at the heart of competition enforcement. It ought to advance it. Indeed, competition law is of great intellectual beauty and practical significance, even when observed with its imperfections and blemishes.