1. Introduction

Criticisms have grown in recent years, especially in Mediterranean countries, of the financial and budgetary austerity policies at the base of the Maastricht Treaty. These criticisms are largely directed at Germany, seen as the custodian of an austerity policy that some European governments blame for the economic stagnation of their countries and the consequent increase in the levels of unemployment (Avelãs Nunes, 2013). However, precisely the Mediterranean countries, under French leadership at the negotiation stage of the Maastricht Treaty, were among the greatest proponents of European monetary integration as evidenced by the fundamental works of Kenneth Dyson and Kevin Featherstone (1999) and Harold James (2012: 168), as well as an interesting book by a central banker, the Dutchman André Szász (1999). Indeed, Germany was seen as the hegemonic country in the euro area; hegemonic because it was economically the strongest country, and as such, imposed the financial austerity policy on other countries. The creation of the euro has manifested some significant flaws and it would thus be interesting to investigate the reasons that
led to the institutional disfunctionality of the single European currency. In the opinion of the author, these reasons must be sought primarily in the ways in which the negotiations took place for the creation of the euro. These negotiations were dominated by the relationship between France and Germany, whereby France considered itself the political Dominus of the new Europe while Germany aimed to strengthen its economy. France thought it needed Germany to have greater weight in international assizes and Germany thought it needed France for political legitimacy in the international arena. France could be seen as a type of aspiring hegemon while Germany as a de facto hegemon, but which it does not want to be.

After a brief examination of the concept of hegemony according to the science of international relations, I analyze its materialization from the end of World War I, showing how a country, in this case Germany, found itself playing the role of hegemon within a group of countries without having had the intention and also without having put in place a suitable project for this purpose. The history of the international monetary system, especially after the end of World War II shows that the rise of the hegemonic role of the U.S. in the West was determined by the unforeseen evolution of world political and military equilibria. In fact, from time to time, the creation of institutional equilibria was sought in relation to specific issues, drawing empirically on the concept of the decomposition of complex problems, as well illustrated by Thomas Schelling (1960).

This same method, which has the flavour of the heuristic approach adopted in institutional engineering, was used in the construction of the European integration process, first creating the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), not to provide a solution to the European coal and steel problems, but to solve a dangerous political dispute between
France and Germany. The ECSC was such a success that it became the reference model for any future strategies of these European countries. The European Common Market (ECM) was inspired by this model, whose philosophy was not, however, political federalism but a type of technocratic functionalism. Regarding institutional models, when the countries of the European community began to address the problem of enlarging the coordination method to the sphere of monetary policy, a model was already available, namely, that which emerged from Bretton Woods. If it is true that elements of the negotiations of the Bretton Woods agreement are to be found in the European monetary integration process, it is also true that the overall context in which the Bretton Woods agreements were determined differed somewhat from the context in which the Maastricht Treaty was determined.

2. Considerations on hegemonic stability

During the formation of the international political economy, some works emerged that reflected the concept of hegemonic stability, an expression of the political, military and above all economic power of a hegemonic country. The concept of hegemonic stability has been the subject of extensive debate in international relations theory. In recalling this concept, those economists who are more sensitive to the issues of international political economy have somehow adapted it to their methodological needs, considering the influence on the political economy of the schools of thought inspired by the New Institutional Economy (NIE) and the Constitutional Political Economy (CPE). In particular, both the NIE and the CPE move away from some methodological assumptions of hegemonic stability typically developed by political studies, weakening the weight of the “power” factor of a State, to lean towards an approach that focuses more on the rules of the
theory of cooperative games and is more in line with the economic methodology. In this sense, for example, so-called hegemonic cooperation (Ishiguro, 2003) can be evaluated, which is based on two fundamental assumptions. The first is related to the existence of a set of States with a liberal-democratic regime and similar ‘strength’, while the second is related to the manifestation of Nash equilibria in cooperative games. Ishiguro hypothesised that if the equilibria produced through interaction processes between politically liberal countries with equal strength they can be stable and the hegemony determined would seem to be mainly that of shared rules and not that of the power of a hegemonic State. Nevertheless, it follows that there is stability if, and only if, the individual States at the time of the negotiation have substantially converging preferences on the objectives and the actions to be taken. To also be considered is the problem of the correctness of the formulation of expectations of the results obtainable from agreed policy actions. Indeed, it is possible that at a later stage, one or more States could have second thoughts; the emergence of regret may depend on the cognitive limitations of the policy makers, limitations brought to light when dynamics and events occur that were not adequately taken into account.

The weakening of the concept of power plays an important role in how Robert Keohane (1984) interpreted the concept of hegemony, in view of the political events that took place after the Second World War. Keohane wrote (cit.p.137),

“Hegemonic leadership does not begin with a tabula rasa, but rather builds on the interests of States. The hegemon seeks to persuade others to conform to its vision of world order and to defer to its leadership. American hegemonic leadership in the post-war period presupposed a rough consensus in the North Atlantic area, and later with Japan, on the maintenance