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REDUCTIONS**

The Eurozone Crisis and the Democratic Deficit



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OF BREAD, GAMES AND GLADIATORS

Why magic bullets will not placate EU citizens and why we should nurture a European democracy instead

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Perhaps it is not surprising to see a political community cling on to survival strategies when going through something everyone calls an “existential” crisis. European politicians have been lined up to save the Euro, and sacrificed on its altar in national elections for the last four years. Their experts have helped them come up with an array of worthy and appropriate “solutions” to the crisis that will most likely ensure the survival of the beast.

But in the process, they have created what could be seen as a worrying EU *legitimacy slippage*: European citizens not only question the policies followed in its name - the doing side - but increasingly question, as a result, the worthiness of the EU itself - the being side. Substantial minorities in various states want to leave the EU (or at least the Eurozone), while majorities believe that they do not benefit from membership (Eurobarometer, October 2013). Even with strong differences between North and South, or creditor and debtor countries, disenchantment reigns across the continent in various shades of grey. The rise of so-called populist Eurosceptic movements in the EU is only the tip of the melting legitimacy iceberg. At the very same time, the EU is set to centralise more functions and thus attract yet more opprobrium.

So what is to be done to reverse the downward legitimacy trend? Everyone seems to agree that in such situations, there are no magic bullets. And yet, too many in Europe today speak and act as if there were. Granted, today's version of *bread and circus* has little to do with the frivolity that characterized the Roman Republic prior to its decline, the mere satisfaction of the immediate, shallow requirements of a populace offered as palliative for the real thing: a polity that works for all and where civic virtues are valued enough to provide a shield against arbitrary rule and corrupt rulers. Nevertheless, there are grounds for scepticism when contemplating the three broad categories of remedies usually offered to bolster EU legitimacy:

Bread

Fair enough. When all this new centralisation will have helped Euro-trains run on time again, the EU is likely to see approval recover. If European leaders manage to save the Euro and restore the conditions for growth across the EU, much will be forgiven and analysts will hail the return of output legitimacy. But more immediate and superficial means of appeasement of the masses are unlikely to be an effective diversion from the pain of unemployment and disenfranchisement. And even if and when better times come, understandings and expectations will have changed in a post-crisis EU. As the EU's global relative decline will

have become clear, publics will not be satisfied with bread alone and will increasingly raise the difficult distributional questions brought into the open by the prevailing “rescue” discourse which has permeated the crisis. Moreover, because the legitimacy of a polity is precisely meant to carry it through the bad times as well as the good – legitimacy takes care of itself on a full stomach – the loss of public trust in the EU matters for the long run. It is clearer than ever that the EU should be such that its *being* or *raison d'être* is not questioned when its *doing* is. Whatever the transitory technical features of Euro-remedies (such as mutual fiscal interference), renewed demands for “local solutions” as permanent features of the polity need to be taken seriously. (Menon, 2008, Nicolaidis, 2013, Scharpf, 2009)

Games

A second category of remedies has to do with the offer of better, more transparent and participatory political games at the EU level to mirror its radical increase in economic competences linked to Eurocrisis management. Audiences are offered better advertised and bigger arenas, EU institutions will rent bigger and better billboards to explain, showcase or communicate Europe, while more European politics will become more transparent, in particular through the internet. It may be the case that revamped games will deliver some shallow input legitimacy to the EU, but is the EU's democratic ambition to compete with its member-states' *démocratie du spectacle*? Could the EU be more responsive to the crowds' thumbs up or down? And beyond, do we believe that such games, however entertaining (and it would be a stretch to say that the EU's are), give citizens a sense of control and ownership over political choices?

Gladiators

Ultimately however, we are told that politics requires fights and faces. Indeed, “leadership”, and better still, leadership contests, serve as the mother of all magic bullets in times of crisis. And thus we have seen much of the attention to addressing the EU's legitimacy crisis channelled towards providing recognisable “EU faces” for EU citizens. Since the EU Commission has acquired significant powers to intervene in the budgetary powers of member states, we are further told it needs to have its President elected democratically, which means through the European Parliament and accountable to it. Many assumptions feed this reasoning. One first is that EU citizens care about the president of the Commission. Another is that a European body politic exists such that a “majority of Europeans”

means something – especially if this majority is drawn from a very low participation rate. Another yet is that a procedure can be devised whereby this electorate, whatever it might be, will really have a sense that they elected the said president. But what if the party with the most votes among European political families does not garner majority support in parliament? What if, conversely, majority support can only be obtained for someone who comes from a smaller party, or worse: has not even campaigned directly? Ultimately, the cult of providential leadership (which includes that of the founding fathers) will lead to short term hype at best, but it is hard to see how it could anchor the sense of accountability of European peoples.

To explain why European elites seem to hang on to the *bread* and *circus* approach to European legitimacy nevertheless is a long story. In a recent book illuminating the interwoven rationales provided since the 1950s to legitimise the EU project, Claudia Schrag Sternberg convincingly recounts how the mainstream legitimisation strategy of EU leaders has always rested on the belief in the twin power of *law* and *techné*, which they had the sole power to interpret and fine-tune in bringing the continent together. This belief therefore was a way of operationalizing what Weiler refers to as European elites' messianism, a sense that, given the mission they were entrusted to accomplish – unify Europe – the end justified the means, including if the means rested on a contempt for popular expression of concern, condemned under the label of "populism."

But there is, of course, a counter-narrative, one which stresses a democratically grounded alternative to elite messianism whereby EU legitimacy is to be extracted from the amalgam of national politics. In this view the *bread, games* and *gladiators* response to the EU legitimacy challenge may help to some extent some of the time, but fails to address the core democracy challenge in Europe which rests at the national level.

Unfortunately, this counter-narrative has all too often relied on its own populist gimmick, by cultivating the concerns of the average man-in-the-street but without any counter-demanding call for citizens to own up to their citizenship (or old fashioned civic duties) in the multi-centered polity that is the EU. Thus, while it is indeed fine and proper to stress the crucial role of national democratic politics in upholding EU legitimacy, this is not to be equated with a blanket call for democratic sovereignty.

Arguably, before the crisis, the EU was increasingly akin to what Richard Bellamy calls republican intergovernmentalism, i.e. a transnational polity dedicated to the rescue of the democratic nation state and resting on the separate legitimacy and integrity as its component national democracies. Similarly, we can refer to the EU as a demoi-cracy, "a union of peoples who govern together but not as one" (Nicolaidis, 2004, 2013; see also Cheneval and Schimmelfennig 2013), or what others have explored as transnational democracy (Bohman) and multilateral democracy (Cheneval). There are two relevant mirroring stories here: the one about how the nation-states of Europe progressively became member states (Bickerton); the other about how the EU's centre of power progressively became reinvested by these member states against the resistance of

what Luuk van Middelaar refers to in his vivid narrative as the EU's inner sphere keen on insulating itself from the messy web of democratic legitimacy (van Middelaar, 2013).

There are no magic bullets to the legitimacy challenge ailing the EU. The (mis)management of the monetary union has exposed the fault-lines of Europe's democracy in the making, revealing probably more deeply than in previous crises the potential and limits of this democratic model. Instead of *bread, games* and *gladiators*, the progressive recovery of its democratic ethos is a more promising, albeit less spectacular remedy. This means, to start with, that EU leaders ought to keenly respect and enforce a "do no harm" principle with regards to national democratic self-government, and test all interventions in domestic arena against it (Chalmers, 2013). It means that EU citizens must make present their concerns in the governance process of the EU through more sophisticated modes of representation and accountability (see inter alia Duchesne et al, Bellamy and Kröger, 2013). And that the management of not only economic but also *democratic interdependence* must be at the heart of Europe's new post-crisis politics.

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