

Europeanism within the “bounds of reason”. Reflections on the prospects of democracy and of supranational political integration

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Abstract

The current crisis of the EU and the “clash of nations” within it make it necessary to question the functioning of democracy and the future of the EU. Nations try to reassert themselves and, pressured by internal public opinion, the national political classes react by demanding a return to the past. Without a political center and without a community identity, can the EU overcome these recent crises?

Keywords

European Union, Democracy, European integration

Introduction

The crisis of the European Union (EU) and the clash of nations within it call for questions about the functioning of democracy and the future of the EU. The two aspects are closely intertwined, as the crises of recent times have shown. Classical democratic theory describes the political process as a voter-representative-decision-making circuit. Voters elect representatives, who form a government that makes decisions in relatively impermeable national arenas. Democracy as a political method to solve the struggle for the governmental power (Schumpeter 1942; Sartori 1957) or as a regime of responsiveness (Dahl 1971), has normally been thought of within the confines of well-defined "communities of destiny", which we have called States or Nations, that are entities often combined together in the concept of nation-state, each of which is a relatively separate world, with its own cultures, language and custom. This functioning has been shaken by the affirmation of the global actors as decision-makers in the domestic arenas. These global actors are outside the national democratic voter-representative-decision-making circuit. Those who decide (or strongly condition the decisions) are not part of our community of destiny, perhaps they do not speak our language or follow our customs. After World War II the national decision-making arenas have lost part of their sovereignty, as a result of supranational integration processes, as in the case of Europe, or the emergence of international regimes such as the UN, or the action of other global players such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. These global actors have increased their interference in the domestic politics of the nation-states mainly by resorting to economic sanctions, such as conditional lending, the threat of trade embargoes, and the control of economic and financial exchange mechanisms. The questions we would like to address are twofold: firstly, how has democracy changed in the contemporary world? Secondly will the EU be able to survive this phase of reassertion of national sovereignties?

Accountability and responsiveness in contemporary democratic theory

A few clarifications are necessary before proceeding further. In the democratic process, the accountability of the political class is strongly linked to its responsiveness, because the mechanism of electoral competition for the governmental power is based on the evaluation of the results of its past exercise or the prospects of its future use. Thus, to become accountable, the political class must answer to the demands of the citizenry, or promise to do so. In turn, these demands cannot be met except by transferring support to portions of the political class. Thus, aspiring to become accountable, the fractions

of the political class in competition must respond to someone; for its part, to have its demands satisfied, the citizenry must transfer its support to any of these fractions and make one of them the winner of the competition (Ieraci 2021: 27-46).

Nonetheless, as a result of the transformations of the contemporary world and the ever-deepening interdependencies of nation-states, those who are called upon to make decisions because they have been made politically accountable by the national electorates are not always able to respond sympathetically to the demands, and indeed their responses may be to some extent hetero-directed. Democracy, as a sovereign regime, suffers nowadays from the effects of some external limitations, stemming from global socio-economic interdependencies, which condition the scope of the political response, its content and its ends. This phenomenon has been variously recognized in the social sciences. Already Lasswell (1951) observed how politics today has become globalized, in the sense that the decisions of the individual national political classes influence each other and bring about unexpected effects on a large scale. Politics today would produce insecurity and uncertainty in individuals, precisely because the decisions of the national governing classes have repercussions on a global level, nor can they be taken in total isolation, even when they are the decisions of a world power, as in the case of the United States of America. Mankind, Lasswell concludes, is in such a condition that decisions made within a single political community have an impact on the lives of all other individuals, or at least a very large portion of them, and for this reason, policy science should adopt a world perspective: "The perspective of a policy-oriented science is world-wide, because the peoples of the world constitute a community. They influence each other's destinies" (Lasswell 1951). The globalization of politics (accompanied by the phenomenon of the growth of state apparatuses and functions) prompts Lasswell to argue that the decisions taken by rulers, with respect to the objectives to be pursued and the relative use of resources, should be scientifically scrutinized. In the contemporary era, world relations are characterized by a previously unknown interdependence, whereby what happens or is decided in America affects what happens or is decided in Europe and vice versa; while, in the domestic sphere, the elephantine size of the government, its apparatuses and functions, makes us realize how every single political decision can potentially produce effects on every individual in the community.

More recently, Ionescu (1975) links the ungovernability of industrial states to the presence of two potentially destructive centrifugal drives: from within the state, there are corporations (trade and industrial unions, multinationals and large corporations, local and regional government administrations); from without the state, there are the effects of the interdependence of representative governments, caused by the techno-

logical revolution, which place international developments beyond the control of the national political classes.

These two contributions identify well the problems inherent in the functioning of the electorate-representative-government-decision-making circuit. Firstly, the presence of interfering elements that originate within advanced industrial societies (i.e. the affirmation of corporations) and, secondly, the globalization of the flow of decision-making, which displaces - or simply makes it difficult to locate - the place of decision-making and makes the decision-makers less identifiable.

Market and Democracy

Political science has dealt with the first horn of the problem (the corporations - in the sense of Ionescu (1975) - and their impact on the internal representative circuit) with such a vastness of contributions and a multitude of theoretical and empirical research that it would be futile to attempt to account for it here. The other phenomenon, that of the displacement of the decision-making center from the domestic and national arena to the supranational one, has been less explored and deserves therefore more attention.

In Schumpeter (1942) the theme is practically absent. The capitalist process of "creative destruction" is threatened by monopolies, to which paradoxically Schumpeter attributes a positive function. In fact, creative destruction can manifest itself against a monopoly, to break it once and for all, whereas a hypothetical situation of perfect competition would make any new entry into the market unlikely. Schumpeter emphasizes a transformation of relevance to our problem, namely the progressive decline of the function of entrepreneurs, because the work of offices and committees tends to supplant personal action and as a consequence the economic progress tends to depersonalize and to automate itself. That means that the industrial bourgeoisie has been reduced to an administrative class and tends to disappear, thus an extraordinary phenomenon unfolds:

"the perfectly bureaucratized giant industrial unit supplants not only the small and medium-sized company and dispossesses its owners, but ultimately supplants the entrepreneur and dispossesses the bourgeoisie [...] The real outriders of socialism were not the intellectuals or agitators who preached it, but the Vanderbilts, Carnegies and Rockefellers" (Schumpeter 1942, 130).

Dahl and Lindblom (1953) and later Lindblom (1977) treated the relationship of the economic sphere to democracy more directly, but within the framework of an inter-

nal regime. Dahl and Lindblom (1953: 3-6) rejected the approach of Schumpeter and others, based on the opposition of "great mythical alternatives", such as capitalism/socialism, and trace the possibilities of controlling social action back to the "choice between specific social techniques", in a very broad field of opportunities for political and economic intervention.¹ With regard to the relationship between democracy and the market, Lindblom emphasized the public role of the business managers, as "a large category of leading decisions [on every fundamental aspect of production and distribution] is reserved for entrepreneurs, large and small, and is removed from the government's sphere of influence", thus "entrepreneurs become a kind of public servants, exercising what, in a broad view of their role, are public functions" (Lindblom 1977: 181). In other words, entrepreneurs occupy a privileged position in the polyarchic political system that is quite different from that of interest groups and other actors who exert pressure on the government: "they [form] a second group of prominent leaders in government and politics" (ib.: 186). Thus, systems based on private enterprise are characterized by a "duality of leadership" (ib.: 191).

This last is a very relevant passage of Lindblom's analysis, because if on the one hand there are effective controls on public officials by the polyarchic mechanisms - we know them: accountability and responsiveness -, there are at the same time controls exercised by entrepreneurs who exploit their privileged position and exercise leadership. However this second group of leaders is not subject to polyarchic control, that is "the privileged controls of corporations are largely independent of the electoral controls of the polyarchy" (ib.: 201). In our terms, entrepreneurs are neither accountable nor responsive. This leads to a "conflict between electoral and privileged controls" which results in a restriction of the "reach of the polyarchy" (ib.: 203). We observe a "rivalry between privileged corporate controls and polyarchic controls" and a "struggle of entrepreneurs to dominate polyarchic politics, in which they acquire a greatly disproportionate influence" (ib.: 211).²

Although these classical contributions do not directly answer our question about the decline of polyarchy sovereignty due to international interdependencies, three phenomena relevant to it are clearly illustrated. Firstly, we observe the duality of leadership in contemporary polyarchies when we look at the role that international elites play in

¹ Price system, hierarchy, polyarchy and bargaining are the four basic socio-political processes for exercising rational choice and control in economic life (Dahl and Lindblom 1953, 99-109).

² Lindblom also analyzed the propensity of government and business leaders to develop alliances not only internally, but also externally between "second-tier roles in business and government, administrators and teaching staff at universities, media managers, younger people who aspire to improvements, and parents who harbour ambitions for their children" (Lindblom 1977: 242). It is well known that Lindblom (1977) and later Dahl (1985) looked at the Yugoslav self-management model as a possible answer.

conditioning the choices of domestic elites. As in the case of the privileged position of entrepreneurs described by Lindblom, international elites and officials operating through international organizations and regimes exercise effective control over the reach of polyarchies, so these elites and officials play a public role. Secondly, this public role is played by a management framed in bureaucratic roles and, similar to the case of the entrepreneur in contemporary capitalism described by Schumpeter, the conditioning action becomes depersonalized and automated. Thus, control over the reach of polyarchies takes on the character of inescapability and objective intervention above partisan interests. Thirdly, no polyarchic electoral control acts on these international elites, they are not accountable for the decisions they impose or strongly condition.

How to measure the relative decline of polyarchical control?

To avoid reducing the debate on the relative decline of polyarchic control to a sterile complaint about the "democratic deficit", one should reflect on the implications for research arising from the three phenomena mentioned above (duality of leadership; automation of decision-making; absence of accountability).

Regarding the first aspect, granted that the expression 'duality' is merely denotative, since one should ultimately speak of a dynamic of leadership stratification from the national to the global level, the decisive point remains the position and role of national (hence elective) governing elites in the very complex network of interactions at the global level. Here we encounter, of course, international regimes and organizations,³ in which sovereign states participate according to a mainly intergovernmental logic. Thus, in international regimes and organizations, member states are represented by delegations of their governments, but they also contribute by promoting and recruiting civil servants and officers who operate in a relatively autonomous way within the scopes of those international regimes and organizations. Already Dahl and Lindblom (1953: 467-468) observed how the United States was involved in a multiplicity of agencies to serve the purposes of cooperation and development with other nations, providing a provisional list of them that they themselves described as incomplete. In a general sense, a state's membership in an international agency entails a variable degree of ceding sovereignty, or at least a disposition to recognize the role of other leaderships in defining national political ends. When states coordinate among themselves, Huntington's (1968) solution to the problem of public interest no longer

³ On the concept of the international regime and for an analysis of the binding nature of its rules, see Clementi (1999).

applies: "What benefits the presidency benefits the country", or "What benefits the presidium benefits the Soviet Union". Presidency, in one case, presidium, in the other, are no longer in a position to define independently the public interest and are subject to conditioning to which they have deliberately surrendered themselves by joining various international agencies.

From this point of view, we are indeed in the presence of a stratification of state-national and international authority that deserves to be investigated. Following the suggestion provided by Dahl and Lindblom (1953: 467-468), a first research step could be to analyze the degree of inclusion/integration of state governments in international regimes, organizations and agencies.⁴ The hypothesis underlying this type of test has a simple formulation: the greater the number of international organizations and/or agencies in which a state participates, the lesser the capacity of its leadership to autonomously define the 'public' or 'national' interest. The latter concepts should be understood precisely in Huntington's sense, referred to above, as the leadership's relatively autonomous capacity to identify the political objectives to be pursued. The decline of this capacity depends on the propensity of member states of international bodies to enter into end-agreements with other states and to select policy objectives on the basis of supposed interests of the international community, so that the national political agenda is set elsewhere and the possible domestic policy response is severely limited by that involvement.

Of course, the weight of each member state in any given international organization or agency can vary greatly, depending on the position occupied within them and the influence exercised in decision-making flows. For example (and a well-known example to all), being a member of the United Nations Security Council gives certain states a capacity for influence and, therefore, greater weight in the deliberations taken, even better if one is a member by right or a permanent member of that Council. Here the research hypothesis is: given the same inclusion/integration of two or more states in international organizations and/or agencies, the relative weight of each varies as the roles and positions occupied in international organizational structures vary. This hypothesis balances the previous one, in the sense that we can accept that a state's willingness to cede shares of sovereignty over the national 'public interest' is commensurate with its expectations of immediate power, or simply control over the activities carried out by the body in question.

Both of these research directions serve the purpose of arriving at a morphology of the distribution of power in international organizations and agencies and could be

⁴ A very useful starting directory is provided, for example, by Schiavone (1997), which indicates for each state the international organizations it participates in.

carried out using a purely 'positional' methodology, i.e. recording the positions occupied by each state and assigning a score to each record so as to arrive at an initial measurement of the stratification of international leadership. To refine the investigation, however, it would also be necessary to empirically address the other two phenomena, namely the automation of decision-making and the absence of accountability. Underlying all this is the perception that the 'policy arenas' or 'arenas of power' (Lowi 1964, 20) have changed profoundly in contemporary times, not only because of the increasing weight of administrative groups and structures, but also because of the globalization of decision-making processes. Policy science has adequate tools at its disposal to develop a new season of research on international decision-making processes: from network analysis ('policy network framework') to its sub-specifications, such as the analysis of policy communities ('policy communities') and advocacy coalition theory ('advocacy coalition framework') (Ieraci 2016; Lanzalaco e Prontera 2012), but above all the 'international political economy' approach (Ferrera 1989).

Through the study of decision-making processes, the actual incidence of international organizations and agencies, as well as their apparatuses, in the process of selecting political values should be verified. Political decision-making appears automated and domestic leaderships lack accountability because they play a marginal role in defining the political values to be pursued.

An example may serve to clarify this point (Ieraci 2019). In 1999, the European Union issued a directive (EC 30/1999) aimed at imposing no-tolerance limits on the dispersion of 'particulate matter' or fine dust (PM_{10}) in the atmosphere of urban areas. By the end of the 1980s, within the framework of Community policies, environmental policy had gradually attained its own specificity and, above all, a relative degree of autonomy guaranteed to it by the role of the Commission, at the proposal stage, and by the organizational growth of DG XI and the European Environment Agency (EEA). The Commission, DG XI and its working groups, EEA and other agencies acting in the field of environmental policy constitute a sort of inner circle in the formulation of the policy problem, due to their technical expertise and management of the relevant data in its definition. These actors seem to constitute a kind of advocacy coalition of environmental policy.

In the case of the Directive (EC 30/1999), at least two actors from outside the EU apparatus also intervene in the identification of the policy problem. These are the World Health Organization (WHO) and some European governments (the "green troika" made of the German, Danish and Dutch governments). The WHO, through studies and research, moral suasion, indicates minimum requirements for health protection, while the governments of the "green troika" stand as guarantors of the targets set by the WHO and provide virtuous examples of environmental protection that the Commission adopts as a reference. The enforced no-tolerance limits for particulate air

pollution (maximum daily and annual thresholds) were the result of these influences and were imposed without much consideration for the geographical differences in Europe and the different development patterns.

Finally, the ancillary function of the European Council of Ministers and the European Parliament should be noted, especially on the basis of the cooperation procedure adopted here. In the European Parliament, the influence exerted by the “green troika” and the ecological parties is pronounced, the Parliament and the environment committee within it offer support for legislative proposals on environmental issues. The case of Directive 30/1999 would seem to show how the intergovernmental character of the EU decision-making process declines (Fabbrini 2013) when it comes to strongly autonomous policy arenas, and how the European Council of Ministers in these cases fails to balance the impulses coming from the Commission and its agencies, as well as - in the specific case studied here - from outside the EU itself.

If we look at the impact of Directive 30/1999 on Member States and local and urban governments, with particular reference to Italy, the effect of the automation of decision-making and the absence of accountability is very evident. On the one hand, the communities and leadership on which the implementation burden falls have in no way contributed to the definition of the maximum permitted limits of particulate pollution; on the other hand, they see themselves as directed by external actors, who are sometimes even difficult to identify, and very demanding and difficult to comply with, under the given conditions. In this way they expose themselves to the effect of the sanctions forced on non-compliant states.

EU as a global actor and the future of Europe

Having thus defined the current crisis of democracy, we can now turn to the second set of problems. What is the role of the EU today? Can the EU survive the current crisis? We have observed the duality of leadership in contemporary democracies, because of the growing role of the international elites and officials operating through international organizations and regimes. These international elites are not accountable for the decisions they impose or strongly condition, they are not submitted to any democratic electoral control. Today’s populist vein has the familiar characteristics of revolt against the political classes, against national and supranational political institutions, and now therefore against the EU.

This revolt presents itself as a clash of nations within the EU. The management of migration, the question of whether it is exclusively up to the nation of arrival of the migrants to provide assistance and asylum to them (Dublin Convention), the rigidi-

ties introduced in 2012 by the Fiscal Compact (which is still an international treaty), the government of the public debt of the PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain) and recently the debated possibility of derogating from the rules of the Fiscal Compact to cope with the pandemic emergency and above all to redistribute income to the social classes that suffered direct economic damage due to the lockdown, in all this the EU member-states have rediscovered themselves as sovereign nation-states, and national public opinions see in the EU an enemy.

Will the EU survive this? I think there are reasons to believe that it will, but things may never be the same again. Let us start from the assumption that the EU is a very articulated institutional complex and which has become stabilized over time. A basic principle is that political institutions, when they have stabilized, are very resilient and change by adapting to new circumstances. To understand how this happens, one has to question the functions that institutions perform (Ieraci 2021: 39-43). A neo-contractual school of thought thinks that political institutions are voluntary constructs aimed at solving coordination problems or even at reducing - in economics - transaction costs, as well shown by Douglass North (1990). Another school, which we could call neo-realist, looks at the political struggle and without reticence says that in politics there are winners and losers (see for example Terry Moe 1990). Institutions would serve to mitigate what we might call the "costs of exclusion" from the enjoyment of political power, whether it be for ideal, personal or collective gain (Ieraci 2021). In both perspectives, one understands why institutions are resilient and die hard. Individuals, political and social actors, groups, parties, governing classes benefit from institutions, either because they make exchanges and relations predictable and sustainable (neo-contractual perspective), or because they guarantee the losers against the selfishness of the winners (realist perspective). In other words, given a set of relatively established institutions, when something no longer works and the toy breaks, everyone has some interest in putting it back into operation, modifying it as necessary.

The EU, as a political-institutional complex, is more a mechanism for coordinating certain national policies than an instrument for resolving the political struggle. Philippe Schmitter (1996) called it a "condominium", not a true supranational state, and in the European condominium there are some common parts (e.g. currency, agrarian policy, cohesion policies) and many important private parts (e.g. armies and police, justice and taxation, labor market policies). The attempt to make the EU an institution to also settle the political struggle - an old dream of Altiero Spinelli and Jean Monnet - has never really got off the ground and recently foundered again with the European Constitution prepared by the European Convention in 2003 and buried by the French and Dutch referenda in 2005. European integration, after all, has mainly followed functionalist, i.e. condominium, and never political lines of development.

Many argue that the EU will not survive because it does not have a political center, but I argue that instead it can overcome even these recent crises despite not having a political center. The reason lies in the double value of the institutions mentioned above. A multitude of coordination problems between the policies of the European states can still be solved by the mechanisms of the EU. The gigantic transaction costs generated by a neo-mercantile turn of the national economic systems frighten everyone, especially entrepreneurs and significant portions of the political class, as the Brexit case. It may be that in the future the “variable geometry” of European integration will be accentuated, with some states maintaining their current ties and perhaps forging new ones, while others will slip away on this or that issue. After all, this is how it all started, with multilateral agreements on coal and steel, then on agriculture. All of this could still continue indefinitely, because by staying out you lose more. Europe could continue to survive, without governing its major problems, and the “toy” could be readapted to more immediate and functional purposes for the states.

Pressurized by the eagerness for a return to the sovereign states – a trend which should be called by its name: nationalism – Europe’s future is therefore uncertain, even though the prompt response to the recent economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the UE is far from useless. Can a European interest be opposed to conflicting national interests? Does it make sense to speak of a European interest? At first glance this is problematic, given that there are 27 states in the EU with as many freely elected governments. I would therefore suggest starting with the question of whether there is a national interest at all. Since I will argue that there is no such thing as a tangible national interest, I come to the paradox that if we accept the term national interest, it is incomprehensible why we cannot *a fortiori* use the term “European interest” in reference to a “Union of sovereign nation states”.

To support this seemingly paradoxical argument, I start from the observation that common sense personifies the nation, treating it as something existing in reality. Many profound studies on nationalism (see above all Goio 2021), starting with Mario Albertini’s *Lo Stato nazionale* (1960) and Federico Chabod’s *L’idea di Nazione* (1961), have posited that the nation is not something that exists, it is not a thing. “The idea of nation is, first and foremost, for modern man, a spiritual fact, it is soul, spirit”, wrote Chabod (1961: 11). More explicitly, Albertini reduces the nation (and nationalism) to the ideology of a particular form of power, that of the state (on this point, see Goio 2021). The obvious conclusion, in line with certain arguments of S.P. Huntington (1968) on the public interest and the Realpolitik school, is that the national interest is only a declination of the nationalist ideology, it is what the ruling class determines it to be.

Some might argue that, as a spiritual or ideal fact, the nation pre-exists the political classes, it would be something inherent in the original political communities that are living. This organicist argument blatantly ignores that that spiritual fact is created with blood and tears by state power. The language and culture of a nation are often pointed to as indicators of the spiritual fact. Many are unaware, for example, that even between the 16th and 18th centuries in parts of today's Great Britain (Cornwall, Wales, Scotland) English was neither understood nor spoken, and that the English government forced the use of the English language in a very blunt manner: suppressing indigenous languages (the case of Welsh, abolished for four centuries, is well known) and inflicting heavy punishments, even physical punishment, on those who persisted in speaking them. Similar evidence can be excerpted from the history of French as a national language and France as a political community. The nation state artfully creates a single cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity, and conditions us to believe that it has always existed and that it is in our interest to defend it. On this basis, the nation-state - i.e. its political class - defines the national interest as the necessary defense of the identity it has artificially created.

The argumentative leap is now bold, but consequential. If the state has created the community we call nation and the ideology of national interest, what is to prevent a "European community of destiny", which we could perhaps call "Union", and a European interest as an ideology that mobilizes the defense of that community? If the nation-state has succeeded in its ideological manipulation, imposing a language, homogenizing ethnic and anthropological traits, creating the character of the nation (to use Federico Chabod's language again), why could not Europe, or another supra-state entity, one day, succeed in doing so, if it were to rely on different elements of integration and identification, such as the individual, or law, or social justice, or "being European"?

Of course, there is a big difference and a big obstacle. The former is the centuries-old habit of thinking of us in terms of national characteristics (who remembers George Orwell's (1941) fine pages about the bad-toothed English and the rowdy Italians?),⁵ but let it be said that even the peoples that pre-existed England and France had their own atavistic and inalienable characters, which they then lost or forgot over the centuries. The latter, on the other hand, is given by the fact that states build their nations using the monopoly of violence, thanks to which they can "soften the pain of childbirth": they have suppressed languages that already exist, inflicted severe punishments on those who used them, de-

⁵ "National characteristics are not easy to pin down, and when pinned down they often turn out to be trivialities or seem to have no connexion with one another. Spaniards are cruel to animals, Italians can do nothing without making a deafening noise, the Chinese are addicted to gambling. Obviously such things don't matter in themselves. Nevertheless, nothing is causeless, and even the fact that Englishmen have bad teeth can tell something about the realities of English life."

ported populations, even physically eliminated them in some tragic occasions. The state is not a benevolent creature, it is a Leviathan. Obviously, the EU would not do this, even if it were able to. Today, many argue that a supranational entity is impossible or difficult because it could not or would not deliver and guarantee the same rights and services as the state. However, there is no reason why those same services and rights offered today by the nation-state (health protection, pension scheme, education, housing and similar) should not and could not be guaranteed by supranational bodies or “continental states” (which have existed in the past and still exist in the world today). The nation-state has progressed by unifying territories and services, it is hard to see why a larger entity cannot do the same. Of course, the problem is - as the early European federalists well knew - the construction of an effective center of power in Europe, i.e. the possibility of a new supranational monopoly of violence, with its implementing and administrative levers. We know, it is a cyclopean and today probably unrealistic endeavour, but it is not illogical to think so, nor is it absurd to speak of the European interest, as if it were an ideal less worthy of being defended than the national interest.

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