

Review - The Crisis of the European Union

Written by Anthony Szczurek

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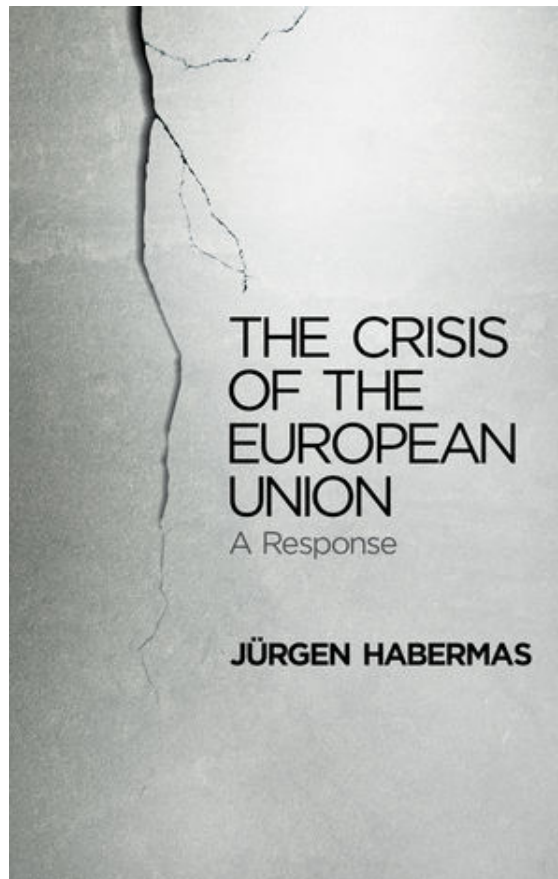
ANTHONY SZCZUREK, APR 3 2013

The Crisis of the European Union: A Response

By: Jürgen Habermas

Cambridge: Polity, 2012

(translated from the German by Ciaran Cronin, German edition published 2011)



In a recent interview with the British magazine *New Statesman*, a retired Greek diplomat laid out the disturbing picture of his country. Describing the potential for further rioting he claimed, "there are contacts by certain politicians with elements in the armed forces to guarantee that in the event of major social unrest, the army will not intervene." [1] And so in this, the beginning of the fourth year of the euro crisis, a European Union member feels the need to secure a promise against military takeover. The results of this slow-moving catastrophe are in no way limited to one country, however. Italy, Spain, Malta, Portugal, Cyprus, and Ireland have all sought or likely will seek bailouts from their Eurozone partners and several governments have fallen in votes of no-confidence. As the primary creditor for the zone, Germany has simultaneously become its chief economic and political policymaker as well as the most hated country in the Union, with protestors and various media calling Chancellor Angela Merkel Europe's modern day

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Führer, seeking to solidify her country's rightful status as Europe's hegemon, this time realized through austerity measures rather than bullets. After growing uneasiness, the Tory government in London has promised to hold a referendum on whether to affirm or rescind the country's membership in the Union. Turkey's twenty-six year bid to become a member has for the most part been frozen as it increasingly turns its gaze towards the Middle East where its long-sought aspirations to becoming a regional power will hopefully be more appreciated. In short, Europe's nationalist boundaries, those supposedly smoothed over in the past six decades through policies of "Europeanization," have, in a remarkably short amount of time, violently cracked through. It is difficult to match the original hopes for a united Europe with the disjointed body now on display, hacking away at its own citizenry in attempts at self-repair.

With the general consensus being that further political consolidation should be put on hold, Jürgen Habermas has stood out calling to take the opposite approach. His book, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, contains two essays, both of which are a rapturous defense of the Union and a celebration of what he calls its democratic and "civilizing" model for world politics.[2] The Union's origins as an economic system, i.e. the European Coal and Steel Community, designed to bind states together financially to prevent future wars on the continent is well-known and tends to lead to the assumption that its political aspirations, including political coordination among the member states, is just so much window dressing. The dream of a politically unified Europe is an old one, however, and the original founders most likely believed an economic association was a much easier sell so soon after the war, with the political structures to follow later, such as the European Parliament's first elections in 1979. Habermas deftly illustrates the democratic deficit that has existed since the EU's beginnings with the elite Brussels bureaucracy and heads of state pushing further political and economic integration on one side and the "people" who at best have been ambivalent about the process on the other. Continuing on, it will result in a post-democratic system whereby the frame of a liberal, representative system is kept in place while real power is consolidated among technocrats and state executives.

Instead, Habermas proposes the long-discussed model of a federal system whereby the national, or in the EU's case, the supranational, takes precedent over the individual states, and therefore the constitutional structure would be one of "originally shared" popular sovereignty where the rights and reach of European law would never fall below the baseline set by national laws.[3] To assuage concerns of anti-federalists, states would retain considerable power since unanimity would be required to amend intergovernmental treaties and states would retain the right of exit from the EU. Moreover, states would continue their role as the primary "actors on the long historical path towards civilizing the violence at the core of political power,"[4] as well as continue to perform their proven role as guarantors of law and freedom. But reaching a federal level of economic and political coordination will need to have the backing of the citizenry. To do so, they must realize their part in the European family and the formation of a transnational will: "the more the national populations realize how profoundly the decision of the EU pervade their daily lives, the more their interest in making use of their democratic rights also as EU citizens will increase." [5]

The second essay attempts to situate the EU as the latest development in the struggle to realize universal human rights and human dignity. The cataclysmic violence visited upon hundreds of millions of people in World War II violated a long-held notion of human dignity. While the concept of human rights dates back to the 17th century, it lacked substance as a tangible, juridical category.[6] The crimes committed during the war solidified an appreciation for the intrinsic value of preserving and sustaining human dignity of all individuals, which then became the frame through which human rights became the cornerstone of international law, most notably in the founding of the United Nations. In this way, the classical civil rights to freedom of commerce, exercise of religion, and rights to political participation were linked to social and cultural rights. In other words, human dignity is the portal through which morality and democratic lawmaking are linked to each other.[7] Hence, legal claims to rights today are fortified with an unquestioned respect demanded for a status that is inherent. However, even though countries such as Sudan and North Korea now pay lip service to the recognition of these rights, they are not upheld within a global legal framework. Since the recognition of human dignity is directly linked to citizenship within the political structure of a constitutional space, the only way to ensure the universal realization of human rights would be through the formation of a constitutionalized world society, of which the European Union provides a model first step.

Like the Union, a global community would only be realized after the formation of a transnational will and the restriction

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of international law to the moral and legal tasks necessary to maintaining order. In this way, a cosmopolitan system would form and ensure all citizens the equal right and opportunity to participate in the practice of global politics. Since human rights and dignity are universally recognized despite cultural context, they would be the tools used to extend the reach and palatability of cosmopolitan law.

Habermas wishes this work to come across as both hopeful and prophetic, yet one is left with several arresting questions. Why have the people of Europe been so resistant to transnational will formation and the formation of a common political culture, not exhibited in the least in the way wealthier national electorates have come to strongly resent coming to the aid of their counterparts in crisis-stricken states? How can the Union provide a model of democratic governance when voter participation in the elections for the European Parliament has been below 50% since 1999?[8] Or when it sidestepped its own laws and pushed through the amendments of the Lisbon Treaty, even though its predecessor, the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, had been rejected by French and Dutch voters? What kind of human dignity is it upholding when a majority of its members participated as hosts to CIA black sites, where individuals accused of terrorism were either held en route to other sites or where torture was performed? Or when austerity measures demanded of states in need of a bail out results in widespread violence, rioting, poverty, xenophobia, and a general limit to the capabilities of millions to lead meaningful, healthy lives?[9] What do rising levels of income stagnation and income stratification say to its belief in the ability of free and open markets to keep the level of poverty at a manageable level? Given the likely, unpalatable answers, it is not clear in what forms the EU could be a model.

The essays' teleological tendency to view the universal realization of human rights and liberal democratic governance as the inevitable conclusion leads it to resemble more of a wish list rather than a coherent argument from a respected theorist. While his critiques regarding the Union's democratic deficit are spot on, Habermas leaves much to be desired in his calls for the formation of a transnational will and the growing potential for the EU to develop into a post-democratic and technocratic empire. While certainly not impossible given the short amount of time nation-states have been the dominant form of political order, it is unclear how to expand an individual's identity beyond one except for those with the resources to view themselves as "global citizens" nor is it clear how the essence of a liberal democratic system could be revived.

In the end, the entire project seems a touch anachronistic in the vision of its formation. Politics today seems to be moving towards some kind of people-driven practice, i.e. Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. While it remains to be seen what the lasting impact of these movements will be, it is likely some essence of them will remain. The EU as a project from its very beginnings has been elite-driven and it continues to be. The project as laid out in this book continues in the same vein, contrary to the author's protestations. Rioters in Athens and Madrid are not calling for a stronger Union, but neither are they necessarily calling for complete dissolution – not all of them at least. What they are calling for is a recognition of the dignity they have been promised for the last two hundred years and which is in danger of being snuffed out. Their livelihoods should not be sacrificed at the altar of a dream.

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Anthony Szczurek received his Master's in International Affairs from the Graduate Program in International Affairs at the New School in 2011. He currently resides in New York City.

[1] Leigh, Phillips. "Greece: A Promise From the Army Has Been Obtained to not Intervene Against a Civil Uprising." <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2013/02/greece-promise-army-has-been-obtained-not-intervene-against-civil-uprising> NewStatesman.com. February 24, 2013

[2] Habermas, Jürgen. *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*. Polity Press. 2012. Trans. Ciaran Cronin.

[3] Ibid pp. 37 – 39

[4] Ibid p. 41

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[5] Ibid p. 49

[6] Ibid pp. 71 – 74

[7] Ibid pp. 80 – 86

[8] “Turnout Trends at European Elections.” http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004/ep-election/sites/en/results1306/turnout_ep/turnout_table.html

[9] See Dablis, Andy. “Greek Suicide Rate Keeps Soaring.” <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2012/11/22/greek-suicide-rate-keeps-soaring/> Greek Reporter. November 22, 2012 and Mason, Paul. “Alarm at Greek Police Collusion with Far-Right Golden Dawn.” BBC News. October 17, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-19976841>

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