

Social Europe

politics, economy and employment & labour

“New” Perspectives For Europe

by Jürgen Habermas on 22/10/2018



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I am invited to talk about New Perspectives on Europe, but new ones fail me, and the Trumpian decay afflicting even the core of Europe makes me seriously question my *old* perspectives. Certainly, the risks associated with a significantly changed state of the world have penetrated public awareness and have altered perspectives on Europe. They have also directed the broader public's attention to the global context in which the countries of Europe have more or less unquestioningly felt at home so far. The perception has grown within public opinion throughout the nations of Europe that new challenges affect each and every country *in the same way* and therefore could best be overcome *together*. That strengthens, indeed, a diffuse wish for a politically effective Europe.

So, today, the liberal political elites proclaim, louder than before, progress *should be* made in European co-operation in three key areas: Under the heading European foreign and defence policy, they demand a boost to the military self-assertiveness that would allow Europe “to step out of the shadows of the USA”; under the motto of a common European asylum policy, they further demand robust protection of Europe's external borders and the establishment of dubious reception centres in North Africa; and, under the slogan “free trade”, they wish to pursue a common European trade policy in the Brexit negotiations as well as in the negotiations with Trump. It remains to be seen whether the European Commission, which is conducting these negotiations, has any success – and whether, should it fail, the common ground of EU governments simply crumbles away. That's one, encouraging side of the equation. The other is that nation-state selfishness remains unbroken if not bolstered by misguided considerations of the new International of surging right-wing populism.

Nationalist Short-Termism

The hesitant progress of the talks on a common defence policy and on an asylum policy that, again and again, falls apart over the distribution question shows that governments give priority to their short-term national interests – and this all the more so, the more strongly they are exposed at home to the undertow of right-wing populism. In some countries there's not even any tension left between empty pro-European declarations on the one hand and short-sighted, un-cooperative behaviour on the other. In Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, and now in Italy and pretty soon probably in Austria, this tension has evaporated in favour of an openly europhobic nationalism. That throws up two questions: How is it that, in the course of the last decade, the contradiction between residual pro-European lip-service and the actual blockade of the required cooperation has come to such a head? And why is the eurozone nevertheless still holding together when, in all countries, right-wing populist opposition to "Brussels" is growing – and at the heart of Europe, i.e. in one of the six founding nations of the EEC, has even led to an alliance of right- and left-populists based on a shared anti-European programme?

In Germany the twin issues of immigration and asylum policy have since September 2015 dominated the media and pre-occupied public opinion to the detriment of anything else. This fact suggests a swift answer to the question about the decisive cause of the increasing wave of euroscepticism, and that suggestion may be supported by some evidence in a country which still suffers from the psycho-political divisions of an unequally reunited nation. But, if you look at Europe *as a whole* and especially the eurozone *in its entirety*, growing immigration cannot be the primary explanation for the surge in right-wing populism. In other countries, the swing in public opinion developed far earlier and indeed in the wake of the controversial policy for overcoming a sovereign debt crisis brought on by the crisis in the banking sector. As we know, in Germany the AfD was initiated by a group of economists and business people around economics professor Bernd Lucke, that is by people who feared the snaring of a prosperous major exporter in the chains of a "debt union" and who set in train the broad-based and effective polemical campaign against the threat of mutualising debt. Last week the tenth anniversary of the insolvency of Lehmann Brothers recalled the arguments about the causes of the crisis – was it market failure or government failings? – and the policy of enforced internal devaluation. This debate was conducted in other eurozone member states with substantial impact on public opinion whereas here in Germany it was always played down by both the government and the press.

Germany Alone

The predominantly critical voices in the international debate among economists, which were the voices of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream against the Schäuble- and Merkel-driven austerity policies, have been barely noted and appreciated by the business pages of the leading media in Germany, just as on their political pages the social and human costs that these policies have dished out – and by no means only in countries like Greece and Portugal – were more or less ignored. In some European regions the unemployment rate is still just below 20 percent while the youth jobless rate is almost twice as high. If we today are worried about democratic stability at home, we ought also to remember the fate of the so-called "bail-out countries": It is a scandal that in the unfinished house of the European Union such a

draconian policy which impinged so deeply upon the social safety net of *other* nations was lacking even in basic legitimacy – at least according to our usual democratic standards. And this still sticks in the craw of Europe's peoples. Given that within the EU public opinions on politics are formed exclusively within national borders and that these different public spheres are not yet readily available *one for one another*, contradictory crisis narratives have taken root in different eurozone countries during the past decade. These narratives have deeply poisoned the political climate since each one draws exclusive attention to one's *own* national fate and prevents that kind of *mutual* perspective-taking without which no understanding *of and for another* can be formed – let alone any feeling for the shared threats that afflict all of us equally and, above all, for the prospects of pro-active politics that can deal with common issues and only do so in a cooperative mode and mentality. In Germany this type of self-absorption is mirrored in the selective awareness of the reasons for the lack of co-operative spirit in Europe. I am astonished about the *chutzpah* of the German government that believes it can win over partners when it comes to the policies that matter to us – refugees, defence, foreign and external trade – yet simultaneously stonewalls on the central question of completing EMU politically.

Within the EU, the inner circle of the member states of the EMU are so tightly dependent on each other that a core has crystallised, even if only for economic reasons. Therefore, the eurozone countries would, if I may say so, naturally offer themselves for acting as pace-makers in the process of further integration. On the other hand, however, this same group of countries suffers from a problem that threatens to damage the entire European Project: We, especially those of us in an economically booming Germany, are suppressing the simple fact that the euro was introduced with the expectation and political promise that living standards in *all* member states would converge – whereas, in fact, the complete opposite has come to pass. We suppress the real reason for the lack of a co-operative spirit that is more urgent today than ever before – namely, the fact that no monetary union can in the long run survive in view of an ever-wider divergence in the performances of different national economies and thereby in the living standards of the population in different member states. Apart from the fact that, today, in the wake of an accelerated capitalistic modernisation, we have also to cope with unrest about profound social changes, I consider the anti-European feelings spread by both left- and right-wing populist movements not as a phenomenon which only mirrors the present kind of xenophobic nationalism. These eurosceptic affects and attitudes have different roots that lie in the failure of the European process of integration itself; they emerged independent of the more recent populist inflammation of xenophobic reactions in the wake of immigration. In Italy, for example, euroscepticism provides the sole axis between a left and a right populism, i.e. between ideological camps that are deeply split when it comes to issues of “national identity”. Quite independently of the migration issue, euroscepticism can appeal to the realistic perception that the currency union no longer represents a ‘win-win’ for all members. The south against the north of Europe and *vice versa*: Whilst the “losers” feel badly and unjustly treated, the “winners” ward off the feared demands of the opposing side.

Macron Plan

As it transpires, the rigid rules-based system imposed upon the eurozone member states, *without creating compensatory competences and room for flexible joint conduct of affairs*, is an arrangement to the advantage of the economically stronger members. Therefore, the real question to my mind does *not* arise from an undetermined either "for" or "against" Europe". Underneath this crude polarisation of a "pro" or "con" which goes without any further differentiation, there remains among Europe's supposed friends a tacit question which so far remains untouched even though it is the key fault-line – namely, whether a currency union operating under sub-optimal conditions should just be made "weatherproof" *against the risk of further speculation*, or whether we should hold fast to the broken promise about *developing economic convergence* in the euro area and therefore develop the monetary union into a proactive and effective European political union. This promise was once politically linked to the introduction of the EMU. In the proposed reforms from Emmanuel Macron both goals have equal value: On the one hand, progress towards safeguarding the euro with the aid of the well-known proposals for a banking union, a corresponding insolvency regime, a common deposit guarantee for savings and a European Monetary Fund democratically controlled at the EU level. Despite diffuse announcements it is well known that the German government has been blocking any further steps from being taken in this direction – and is resisting all this up to now. But Macron is on the other hand also proposing the establishment of a eurozone budget and – under the heading "European minister of finance" – the creation of democratically-controlled competences for political action at the same level. For the European Union could gain political prowess and renewed popular support only by creating competences and a budget for implementing democratically legitimised programmes against further economic and social drifting apart among the member states.

Interestingly, this decisive alternative between the goal of stabilising the currency on the one hand and the further-reaching objective of policies aimed at containing and shrinking economic imbalances on the other hand has not yet been put on the table for a wide-ranging political discussion. There is no pro-European Left that comes out for the construction of a Euro Union which is able to play a role at the global level and, thereby, has in sight the far-reaching goals such as an effective clamping down on tax evasion and a far stricter regulation of financial markets. That way, European social democrats would first of all emancipate themselves from the convoluted liberal and neoliberal goals of a vague "centre". The reason for the decline of social democratic parties is their lack of profile. Nobody knows any longer what they're needed for. For social democrats no longer dare to take in hand the systematic taming of capitalism at the *very* level at which deregulated markets get out of hand. In making this connection I'm not in particular concerned with the fate of a distinct family of parties – although we should always remember when talking about this that the fate of democracy in Germany is historically more tied up with that of the SPD than with any other political party. My general concern is with the unexplained phenomenon that the established political parties in Europe are unwilling to or fail to forge platforms upon which positions and options vital for the future of Europe are sufficiently differentiated. The upcoming European elections serve as an experimental design in this regard.

On one side, Emmanuel Macron, whose movement so far is not represented in the European Parliament, is trying to break up the current party groups so as to build a clearly *recognisable* pro-European faction. By contrast, all those groups currently represented in the Parliament, with the obvious exception of the anti-EU far right factions, are internally divided even below the actually required degree of differentiation. Not all the groups allow themselves such a widely-spread balancing act as the EPP which so far is clinging on to Orbán's membership. The mindset and conduct of the CSU-member Manfred Weber who is seeking to become president is typical of the wishy-washiness that goes with a totally ambiguous stance. But there are similar splits running through the liberal, socialist and (not least) leftist groups. With regard to at least a lukewarm commitment to Europe, the Greens might share a more or less clear position. Thus, even inside the Parliament, which is supposed to create majorities for societal interests generalized across national borders, the European Project has obviously lost any sharper contours.

Caught In A Trap

If you in the end ask me, not as a citizen but as an academic observer, what my overall assessment is today, I'll have to admit to failing to see any encouraging trends right now. Certainly, economic interests are so unambiguous and, despite Brexit, as powerful as ever that the collapse of the eurozone is unlikely. That implies the answer to my second question: why the eurozone still clings together: Even for the protagonists of a northern euro the risks of separation from the south remain incalculable. And for the corresponding case of a southern state's exit we have seen the test case of the current Italian government that, despite loud and clear declarations during the election campaign, has immediately relented; for one of the obvious consequences of leaving would be unsustainable debts. On the other hand, this assessment is not very comforting either. Let's face it: if the suspected link between the economic drifting apart of the eurozone member economies on the one hand and the strengthening of right-wing populism on the other hand in fact holds, then we're sitting in a trap in which the necessary social and cultural preconditions for a vital and safe democracy face further damage. This negative scenario naturally cannot count for more than just that. But already common-sense experience tells us that the European integration process is on a dangerous downward curve. You only recognise the point of no return when it's too late. We can only hope that the rejection of Macron's proposed reforms by the German government has not been the *last lost opportunity*.

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