



The Lure of Technocracy

Jürgen Habermas

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Jürgen Habermas

The Lure of Technocracy

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Preface to the English Edition

The texts included in the third part of this essay collection deal with the relationship between Jews and Germans, a topic that touches the most sensitive nerve of the political self-understanding of citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. The essay on Heinrich Heine also revisits the European theme of the two preceding parts of the volume.

In the first part, the title essay, which presents my view of the crisis politics of the Eurozone, is followed by two more strictly academic contributions. My interest in the complex issue of European integration has always also been informed by the viewpoint of the philosophy of law. The entirely unique character of the European Union has thus far eluded clear conceptualization in political science and constitutional law. If the project is not destined to fail after all, then this unification process could signal a decisive step towards a postnational world order, one which is also indispensable if unbridled global capitalism is to be steered into socially acceptable channels. The second part of the book contains political interventions from the past two years. They are meant to familiarize British readers in particular with a German perspective on problems that affect us all. In both respects, the present book is a continuation of my two previous studies on European politics.^{[1](#)}

However, the results of both the most recent European election and current opinion polls reflect a high degree of scepticism towards and rejection of 'Brussels'. Given this desolate state of affairs, my perseverance in advocating European integration will be greeted with amazement. But in view of the deepening European political divide between

the continent and the UK, it is all the more necessary for us to familiarize ourselves with each other's perspectives.

The unanimous opposition of all British parties to the election of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission, and hence as the leader of the Brussels executive, was a clear signal of the antagonisms that exist – and have existed from the beginning – between the UK and most continental countries over the goal of European unification. To date, conflicts over goals have been sparked mainly by the question of whether each of the incremental territorial 'enlargements' of the Union must be followed by a corresponding 'deepening' of its institutions – or whether the purpose of the Union should be more or less exhausted in a single market.

Since the banking and sovereign debt crisis, the question of further integration has acquired renewed urgency. On this occasion, economic imperatives necessitated another step of integration within an insufficiently institutionalized monetary union – that is, within the Eurozone.² In the UK, this development has stirred up old conflicts, even if the *triggering* causes of the increasing Europhobia did not have their origin in the country itself but on the continent.

In order to avert the dangers of the current economic crisis, the member states of the European Monetary Union have been compelled to engage in closer intergovernmental cooperation over the past five years. This has led to regulations that fall far short of halting the trend towards increasing imbalances between the national economies of these countries. However, the new technocratic form of cooperation, which for the present still largely eludes democratic controls, has increased the awareness of an already existing shortfall in legitimacy. The national parliaments have been caught by surprise by the measures to combat the crisis. As a result, there is a heightened

sensitivity in the Eurozone that the European decision-making structures are in need of an overhaul. This explains the outrage that arose here when, after the most recent European election, the heads of government wanted to disregard the most successful among the candidates fielded by the European parties for the post of President of the Commission. The need for further democratization is felt more strongly in the core European countries than in the countries on the periphery.

To be sure, these causes are merely triggers for the dispute over the objectives that the citizens associate with European unification. Such conflicts over goals carry weight when they break out, even for understandable reasons, between whole nations. Attitudes towards the project of unification that was once outlined in visionary terms by Winston Churchill are shaped by a mixture of national interests and the historical self-understanding of a nation. Such an issue cannot be a matter of the one side being right and the other wrong. In retrospect, the political elites are at worst open to the charge of having pressed ahead with this project over the heads of their populations. Now, in a long-overdue process of political will-formation among the citizens themselves, lost ground has to be *recuperated* under unfavourable circumstances.

It may help us to gain a better understanding of national differences to recall the truly historic speech delivered by the great statesman and rousing orator Churchill in the Festsaal of the University of Zürich on 19 September 1946.³ The Shakespearean format of this speech has often been praised. One need only call to mind the ruined landscape of a Europe reduced to rubble and bled to death in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the recent mass murders and crimes against humanity, to be amazed even today at the improbability and the visionary power of that far-sighted perspective presented in this

speech. To his contemporaries, this man, whom they knew to be an inveterate political realist, must have seemed like a dreamer.

Churchill is clearly aware of this situation and speaks first in the conditional: 'If Europe were once united in sharing of its common inheritance, there would be no limit to happiness, to the prosperity and the glory ...' Then he evokes present and future dangers – 'the dark horizons for the approach of some new peril, tyranny and terror' – but only to offer a surprising answer to the rhetorical question of what could rescue the situation: 'We must build a kind of United States of Europe.' Given the perplexity that this could be expected to arouse among his audience, he appeals to the courage of the hesitant: 'All that is needed is the resolve of hundreds of millions of men and women to do right instead of wrong and to gain as their reward blessing instead of cursing.' And then Churchill becomes practical, well aware that his proposal could not fail to appear unreasonable to a contemporary audience: 'I am now going to say something that will astonish you. The first step in the re-creation of the European family must be partnership between France and Germany.... The structure of the United States of Europe will be such as to make the material strength of a single state less important. Small nations will count as much as large ones ...' From these beginnings a supranational union of states should progressively emerge: 'Why should there not be a European group which could give a sense of enlarged patriotism and common citizenship to the distracted people of this turbulent and mighty continent?'

It may come as a surprise to *today's* readers that Churchill mentioned the vantage point from which he was speaking only at the end of his address – with his impassioned words, he was appealing as a Briton to Frenchmen and Germans, and to their neighbours. He was addressing those

governments and peoples of the continent who would be called the 'core' of Europe only half a century later, from the perspective of a friendly and helpful observer. As was still quite obvious at the time, he saw Great Britain and the Commonwealth, alongside America and Russia, as 'sponsors' of the unification process he was recommending.

Almost seven decades later, the improbable has become a reality. Even the British themselves have in the meantime become citizens of the European Union. And soon they will have to make up their own minds whether they want to withdraw back into the observer perspective of the far-sighted adviser of that time, or whether they prefer after all to remain true to the role that they have adopted in the meantime - that of addressees who followed his wise counsel.

Jürgen Habermas
Starnberg, August 2014

Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union - A Response* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Habermas, *Europe - The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).
2. Claus Offe, *Europe Entrapped* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).
3. Available online at:
<http://www.coe.int/t/dgal/dit/ilcd/archives/selection/churchill/ZurichSpeech_en.asp>.

I

The Lure of Technocracy

1

The Lure of Technocracy A Plea for European Solidarity

(1) In its current form, the European Union owes its existence to the efforts of political elites who were able to count on the passive consent of their more or less indifferent populations as long as the peoples could regard the Union as being also in their economic interests, all things considered. The Union legitimized itself in the eyes of its citizens primarily through the results it produced rather than by fulfilling the citizens' political will. This can be explained not only from the history of its origins but also from the legal constitution of this unique formation. The European Central Bank, the Commission and the European Court of Justice have intervened most profoundly over the decades in the everyday lives of European citizens, even though these institutions are almost completely beyond the reach of democratic controls. Moreover, the European Council, which has energetically taken the initiative during the current crisis, is made up of heads of government whose role in the eyes of their citizens is to represent their respective national interests in distant Brussels. Finally, at least the European Parliament is supposed to establish a bridge between the political battles of opinions in the national arenas and the momentous decisions taken in Brussels. But there is hardly any traffic on this bridge.

Thus, to the present day there remains a gulf at the European level between the citizens' opinion- and will-formation and the policies actually pursued for solving the pressing problems. This also explains why conceptions of the European Union and its future among the general

population continue to be diffuse. Informed opinions and articulate positions on the direction of European development have to the present remained substantially the monopoly of professional politicians, economic elites and scholars with relevant interests; not even the intellectuals who usually participate in public debates have made this issue their own.¹ What currently unite European citizens are the Eurosceptical mindsets that have become more pronounced in all of the member countries during the crisis, albeit in each country for different reasons and for reasons that tend to polarize. Although this trend is an important factor to be taken into account by the political elites, the growing resistance is not really decisive for the actual course of European policymaking, which is largely uncoupled from the national arenas. The influential European political camps are forming in the circles that decide on the *policies* in accordance with controversial crisis diagnoses. The corresponding orientations reflect the well-known basic political orientations.

The European political groupings can be differentiated in accordance with preference variables that are located in two dimensions; it is a matter, on the one hand, of conflicting assessments of the importance of nation-states in an increasingly integrated and highly independent world society, and, on the other, of the familiar preferences for or against strengthening politics vis-à-vis the market. The fields of the cross-classification table that can be constructed by combining these pairs of attitudes towards the desired future of Europe yield, ideally speaking, four patterns of attitudes: among the defenders of national sovereignty, for whom even the decisions taken since May 2010 on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and in the Fiscal Compact go too far, are, on the one hand, ordoliberal proponents of a lean nation-state and, on the other, republican or right-wing populist proponents of a

strong nation-state. Among the proponents of the European Union and its progressive integration, by contrast, are, on the one side, economic liberals of various types and, on the other side, those who argue that the rampant financial markets should be tamed by supranational institutions. If we divide up the advocates of an interventionist policy once again according to where they are located on the left-right spectrum, we could distinguish among the Eurosceptics not only, as mentioned, between republicans or left communitarians and right-wing populists, but also within the integrationist camp between the Eurodemocrats and the technocrats. Of course, the Eurodemocrats should not be summarily equated with 'Eurofederalists', because their ideas on the desirable shape of a supranational democracy are not confined to the model of a European federal state.

The technocrats and the Eurodemocrats constitute, together with the Europe-friendly economic liberals, the temporary alliance of those who are pushing for deeper integration, though only the supranational democrats want to continue the unification process in order to bridge the gulf between *politics* and *policies* which is the decisive factor in the existing democratic deficit. All three factions have reasons for supporting the emergency measures adopted thus far to stabilize the single currency, whether out of conviction or willy-nilly. Most likely, however, this course is being pursued and implemented mainly by a further group of pragmatic politicians who follow an incrementalistic agenda. The politicians who wield power and decide on the course are moving without a comprehensive perspective towards 'More Europe', because they want to avoid the far more dramatic and probably more costly alternative of abandoning the euro.

From the perspective of our typology, however, cracks are forming in this heterogeneous alliance. The pragmatists who are setting the agenda in the short run are allowing

the snail's pace of reforms to be dictated by short-term economic and everyday political 'imperatives', while the more far-sighted pro-European forces are pulling in different directions. The market radicals are primarily interested in relaxing the restrictions on the European Central Bank's self-chosen refinancing policy. The interventionists, buoyed by a tailwind from the crisis-hit countries, are demanding that the austerity course imposed by the German government be supplemented with targeted investment offensives. The primary concern of the technocrats, meanwhile, is to strengthen the decision-making power of the European executive, while the Eurodemocrats defend different models of a Political Union. Driven by different motivations, these three forces are striving to supersede in different directions the rickety status quo to which the governments and political parties, which are under pressure to demonstrate their legitimacy, are clinging in the face of growing Euroscepticism.

The dynamic of the conflicting motives shows that the existing pro-European coalition will disintegrate as soon as the unresolved problems compel the political elites to view and deal with the crisis within an extended time horizon. The road map for a deepening of the institutions of the Economic and Monetary Union drawn up by the Commission, the President of the Council and the Central Bank is testimony to the dissatisfaction with the reactive nature of the existing approach. The heads of government of the Eurozone initially requested this plan, but immediately shelved it again, because they shy away from grasping the hot iron of a formal transfer of sovereignty rights to the European level. For some, republican ties to the nation-state may still be too strong, whereas for others opportunistic motives of preserving their own positions of power may play a role. What pragmatists of all colours want to avoid, however, is another revision of the Treaty.

For then how politics is conducted would have to be changed and European unification would have to be converted from an elite project into one that includes the citizens.²

(2) The Commission, the Presidency of the Council, and the European Central Bank (ECB) – known in Brussels parlance as ‘the institutions’ – are the least subject to legitimation pressures because of their relative distance from the national public spheres. So it was up to them to present proposals for the meeting of the European Council on 13 and 14 December 2012 that represent a brief and already diplomatically pared-down digest of a reform plan published a few days earlier by the Commission.³ This is the first comprehensive document in which the EU develops a perspective for medium- and long-term reforms that goes beyond merely dilatory reactions to critical symptoms. Within this expanded time horizon, attention is no longer focused exclusively on the contingent constellation of causes that since 2010 has connected the global banking crisis with the vicious circle formed by the mutual refinancing of over-indebted European states and undercapitalized banks. Instead it directs attention to longer-term structural causes inherent in the monetary union itself.

The Economic and Monetary Union was designed in the 1990s in accordance with the ordoliberal ideas of the Stability and Growth Pact. It was conceived as a supporting pillar of an economic constitution which was supposed to stimulate free competition among market players across national borders and to be organized in accordance with general rules that were binding on all member states.⁴ Even without the instrument of devaluing national currencies, which is not available in a monetary union, the differences in levels of competitiveness among the national

economies were supposed to gradually even out. But the assumption that permitting unbridled competition subject to fair rules would lead to similar unit-labour costs and to equal levels of prosperity, thereby obviating the need for joint political decision-making on fiscal, budgetary and economic policy, has been proven wrong. Because the optimal conditions for a single currency in the Eurozone are not satisfied, the structural imbalances between the national economies that were there from the beginning have become more acute; and they will intensify further as long as the European policy pattern does not break with the principle of each member state making independent sovereign decisions on fiscal, budgetary and economic policy issues without taking other member states into consideration – in other words, from its national perspective alone.⁵

Despite some concessions, the German Federal Government has clung steadfastly to this dogma until now. The reforms adopted leave the sovereignty of the member states intact, if not de facto, then formally. The same holds for the stricter supervision of national budgetary policies, for the adoption of credit assistance instruments for heavily indebted states – the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the ESM – and for the planned establishment of a banking union and unified banking supervision under the auspices of the ECB (!). At most, the plans now under consideration for a uniform resolution of ailing banks, a transnational bank deposit protection fund and an EMU-wide transaction tax could be regarded as a first step towards a ‘joint exercise of sovereignty by the individual states’.

Only the above-mentioned but provisionally shelved reform plan of the Commission addresses the actual cause of the crisis – namely, the faulty design of a monetary union that clings to the self-understanding of an alliance of sovereign