

GERMAN EUROPE

ULRICH BECK



German Europe

For Elisabeth

German Europe

Ulrich Beck

Translated by Rodney Livingstone

polity

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Preface

Will the Greeks have returned to the drachma or the Germans to the D-Mark by the time readers pick up this book? Or will they simply laugh the idea out of court because the crisis will have long since been overcome and Europe will have emerged from it strengthened? The fact that we even ask such questions and that we seem to be stumbling around in a fog of uncertainty tells us a lot about the elusive state of affairs in Europe and the risk involved in attempting to capture it in words.

Everyone knows what that risk is but to utter it is to violate a taboo. The fact is that Europe has become German. Nobody intended this to happen, but, in the light of the possible collapse of the euro, Germany has ‘slipped’ into the role of the decisive political power in Europe. Timothy Garton Ash summed up the situation in February 2012. ‘In 1953 the novelist Thomas Mann appealed to an audience of students in Hamburg to strive for “not a German Europe but a European Germany”. This stirring pledge was endlessly repeated at the time of German unification. Today we have a

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variation that few foresaw: a European Germany in a German Europe.¹

How could this come to pass? What might its consequences be? What threats does the future hold? What are its attractions? These are the questions I propose to address in this essay.

At the present time, public debate on the subject is dominated almost exclusively by its implications for the economy. There is an irony here when we recall how the crisis took the economists by surprise. The problem created by a purely economic analysis is that it overlooks the fact that the crisis is not purely a matter of the economy (and of thinking about the economy) but is also one of society and politics and our prevailing ways of thinking about them. It is not that I am venturing onto the alien terrain of economics but that economics has lost sight of the society it is analysing.

My intention in this essay is to put forward a new interpretation of the crisis. I should like to try to get to the bottom of the announcements in the daily press or on TV and to set them in a broader context. The reading I offer is based on my theory of the risk society. The vision of a modernity that has gone out of control as I have presented it in a number of books is one I shall develop further here with reference to the crisis of Europe and the euro.

There is a widespread view that what we need to overcome this crisis is more Europe. But we find less and less assent to the idea of 'more Europe' among the people of the member states. Given this situation, is it even possible to conceive of the completion of a European political union? Of a common taxation system and a common economic and social policy? Or is it not the

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reality that the preoccupation with a political union has obscured the crucial question, that of a European society, for so long that we have ended up leaving the most important factor out of the reckoning altogether? That factor is the sovereign people, the citizens of Europe. So let us put society back in. What needs to be done in the midst of this financial crisis is to shed light on the power shifts in Europe and to delineate the new landscape of power. That is the goal of this essay.

Ulrich Beck
August 2012