
Essay

EMBATTLED EUROPE. A PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE ¹

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To a large part of the American public, Europe has become “a dirty word.” Even respectable Republicans echo Mitt Romney’s campaign promise “I do not want to become more like Europe” while the Alt-Right is promoting a visceral fear of “socialism” so as to defend American exceptionalism and encourage anti-EU populism in Europe. President Donald Trump’s call to “make America great again” is also predicated on seeing the European Union as “the enemy” which has cheated the US in trade and freeloaded to secure its defense.² So as to reject the continental preference for peace, equality and civility the conservative media have been predicting the *Strange Death of Europe* – even if that has refused to happen.³ In the rightist discourse, Europe has become a symbol for everything it detests.

For more liberal Americans Europe has, nonetheless, retained some of its allure as holiday destination, trading partner or political alternative. Before the corona crisis, transatlantic airlines continued to be full of vacation travelers, looking forward to taking in sights like St. Mark’s square in Venice, and back-packing students, intent on exploring the continent with Eurail passes.⁴ Moreover, the business class was usually occupied by managers, shuttling to continental subsidiaries or consulting European headquarters of companies with US locations. Finally, to politicians of the Left like Bernie Sanders and moderates like Joseph Biden, the

¹ Dieser Beitrag ist zuerst erschienen in: H-Soz-Kult, 11.07.2020, <www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-5021>.

² Nicholas Kristof, Why is Europe a Dirty Word?, in: The New York Times, 14.01.2012; Mitt Romney, European Socialist Policies Not Right for US, in: Telegraph, 23.09.2011; and David Frum, Trump’s Plan to End Europe, in: The Atlantic, 05.2017.

³ Douglas Murray, The Strange Death of Europe, London, 2017 versus Timothy Garton Ash, Is Europe Disintegrating?, in: New York Review of Books, January 19.01.2017.

⁴ Monthly Tourism Statistics, <<https://travel.trade.gov/research/monthly/departures/>> (05.07.2020).

European way still suggests some progressive policy alternatives which, if adopted, could improve the lives of many Americans.⁵

To resolve this contradiction with reliable information on present-day Europe, this reflection draws on theoretical discussions of a “history of the present” that goes beyond journalistic snapshots by putting current events into a longer time-frame. Looking for bearings in a rapidly changing world is difficult since the outcome of developments is not yet known and the archival record remains inaccessible. Nonetheless, a systematic review of public debates can provide a more stable perspective that differentiates short range panics from longer structural trends.⁶ The source base for such a study consists of speeches and interviews by political actors, as well as commentary in the leading media and by social scientists buttressed by statistics and survey data. Finally, personal impressions from six decades of transatlantic working add lived experiences to the analysis.

On the one hand, this intervention seeks to reaffirm *Europe’s Promise* for those Americans who are searching for a reasonable alternative to Trumpist populism.⁷ Though both sides share fundamental values such as human rights, democracy and capitalism, their implementation is increasingly diverging.⁸ In contrast to the US frequent resort to military force, most Europeans believe in peaceful diplomacy and multilateralism. Unlike the neoliberal American faith in unbridled competition, Europe prefers to curb financial speculation so as to avoid periodic crashes. While the gap between rich and poor is widening in America, this discrepancy is more limited by a generous welfare state on the continent. Comparisons show that many Europeans live more satisfying lives according to a whole spate of criteria, ranging from health care to gun control.⁹

On the other hand, this essay intends to encourage the Europeans themselves to renew their efforts to safeguard their own model against the pressures of globalized competition. The negative stereotypes of the “Brussels bureaucracy” as well as the prevalent crisis rhetoric have

⁵ Edwin G. Dolan, These Charts Show Why Bernie wants to Make America More Like Europe, in: Huffington Post, 6.12.2017; Kat Devlin, Attitudes toward EU are largely positive, both within Europe and outside it, in: Facttank. News in the Numbers <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tak/2019/10/21/attitudes-toward-eu-are-largely-positive-both-within-europe-and-outside-it/>> (05.07.2020).

⁶ Thomas Lindenberger / Martin Sabrow (eds.), German Zeitgeschichte. Konturen eines Forschungsfeldes, Göttingen 2016.

⁷ Steven Hill, Europe’s Promise. Why the European Way is the Best Hope in an Insecure Age, Berkeley 2010.

⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, Free World. America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West, New York 2004.

⁹ Christof Mauch / Kiran K. Patel (eds.), The United States and Germany During the Twentieth Century. Competition and Convergence, New York 2010.

undercut much of the prior progress on integration. Moreover, a group of illiberal populists like the Hungarian Victor Orban is eroding human rights and opposing common solutions to vital questions like migration. Though recognizing the economic clout of the EU, foreign leaders often ridicule its diplomatic and military weakness. Some concerned intellectuals have therefore issued a manifesto for a European Republic: “It is time to turn the promise inherent in Europe into a reality” so that “a common market and a common currency can be created within a common European democracy.”¹⁰

A Promising Future

With the lifting of the Iron Curtain, the European future looked quite bright in 1989/90. Facilitated by détente, the overthrow of Communism in Eastern Europe ended the Cold War, and forced the Red Army to withdraw, leading to the implosion of the Soviet Union. This peaceful revolution from below opened the door to a post-communist transformation among the former satellite states, initiating an exciting transition to democracy and capitalism. Concurrently, the process of West European integration picked up speed and eventually included most of Eastern Europe in NATO and the EU. After half a century of near warfare, the end of ideological confrontation and the reunification of Germany finally offered all Europeans a chance to live in peace, freedom, and prosperity.¹¹ How did this opportunity come about, what obstacles did it have to overcome and what consequences did it involve?

The downfall of Communism in Europe in 1989/91 was simply the most important caesura after the end of the Second World War, since it ended the Cold War and liberated Eastern Europe from Soviet control. On closer inspection, it was both a collapse from above and an overthrow from below, because without the erosion of party resolve and the courage of dissidents, the popular contestation could not have succeeded. Especially astounding was the generally peaceful nature of the system’s change which at other times had required a major war. A rather improbable constellation brought Communism to its knees: A climate of détente encouraged attempts at party reform which allowed dissidents to demand human rights and ordinary people to call for a better life. Since both sides were willing to talk, the result was a “negotiated” or “pacted revolution” that allowed a return to democracy.¹²

¹⁰ Ulrike Guerot / Robert Menasse / Milo Rau, “Manifesto” of the European Balcony Project, 10.11.2018, in: <<https://voxeurop.eu/en/manifesto-for-a-european-republic/>>; cf. Piers Ludlow, Europe and the Rhetoric of Crisis, in: H-Soz-Kult, 19.06.2020.

¹¹ Andreas Wirsching, Der Preis der Freiheit. Geschichte Europas in unserer Zeit, Munich 2012; Andreas Rödter, 21.0: Eine kurze Geschichte der Gegenwart, Munich 2015.

¹² Adam Roberts / Timothy Garton Ash, Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Nonviolent Action from Gandhi to the Present, Oxford 2009.

In spite of the non-violent transfer of power, the East European upheaval was a real revolution that overturned politics, economics, society and culture. According to Jack Goldstone the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe “unfolded as a series of moderate confrontations between crowds engaged in peaceful demonstrations and powerful authoritarian states that [had] lost confidence to defend themselves. The latter conceded power to the opposition or negotiated a change of regime” that became more democratic than before.¹³ In this definition the East European upheavals qualify as revolutions, since they fundamentally changed the political system, replaced planning with a market economy, restratified society and ended cultural censorship. Even if the transition was negotiated, these changes were revolutionary.

Virtually all participants in the peaceful revolution underestimated the enormity of the transformation which the overthrow of Communism would entail. In politics the shift involved a transition from a late socialist welfare-dictatorship to a parliamentary democracy; in economics it meant a change from a faltering planned economy to a competitive form of market capitalism; in international affairs it signaled the end of Soviet hegemony and the reemergence of nation states in the former bloc. But many commentators underrated the adjustment from party dominated collectivism to a person-centered individualism. They also failed to comprehend the effects of changing from a state sponsored Marxist ideology to a Western individualism and popular culture. No wonder that these multiple transitions proved both liberating and unsettling. Only some writers were able to portray what these changes meant to people caught up within them.¹⁴

Though the East European mood has become less celebratory, supporters still maintain that the “great transformation” was largely a “success story”.¹⁵ In politics the restoration of civil rights created new opportunities for self-government even if democratization was more difficult than expected. In economics the reintroduction of competitive markets ended the stagnation of the planned economies with growth spurts that gradually closed the gap to Western living standards. In society the rejection of collectivism opened up space for individual life choices that widened the range of personal experiences. And in culture the end of censorship and Marxist indoctrination reconnected Eastern Europe to international debates and intellectual

¹³ Jack A. Goldstone, *Rethinking Revolutions. Integrating Origins, Processes and Outcomes*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29 (2009), p. 18–32.

¹⁴ Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time. The Last of the Soviets*, New York 2016; cf. Larissa Stiglich, *After Socialism. The Transformation of Everyday Life in Eisenhüttenstadt, 1975–2015*, Diss. Chapel Hill 2020.

¹⁵ Hope Harrison, *After The Berlin Wall. Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present*, Cambridge 2020.

styles, not to mention global pop culture.¹⁶ As a result, the cities of the former Soviet satellites have become vibrant places with impressive prosperity and creativity.

At the same time, European integration has made further progress, both in deepening and widening the European Union. Instead of looking to the US model, commentators reflect on the complexity of the European project that appears both fragile and resilient, full of crises and defeats, yet doggedly pursuing further integration. Its triple structure of supranational, shared, and reserved policy fields suggests a tenuous compromise between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism, moderated by the principle of subsidiarity. Strong in community law and market competition, the Union remains weak in foreign policy, defense and social issues, though there is a tendency towards adding competence whenever a new problem like the policing of external borders appears.¹⁷ As a hybrid form of cooperation that both strengthens and surpasses its member states, the EU needs to be understood as an unfinished project.

Belying the popular rhetoric of doom, the transformation of Europe since 1990 has been nothing short of astounding. Though the transition to democracy and capitalism has been more painful than expected, on the whole it has brought Eastern Europe more freedom and prosperity than before. While the West has sought to deepen its integration project, the East has returned to Europe, joining both NATO and the European Union. No doubt, the post-communist transformation has produced strains and disappointed hopes for perfect democracy and consumer wealth. Shedding decades of authoritarian legacy and advancing economic development have required enormous effort and massive aid to narrow the gap to the West.¹⁸ But at the beginning of the twenty-first century most Europeans had ample reason to look with optimism into a better future.

An Avalanche of Crises

Just when everything seemed to be going well, a veritable avalanche of crises descended upon the European Union that threw its viability into doubt. Starting in the US, the fiscal debt crisis spilled over to Europe through the collapse of lending, endangering the solvency of heavily indebted Mediterranean countries as well as the survival of the Euro as a transnational currency. A few years later, a tidal wave of desperate African and Middle Eastern refugees washed up upon the continental shores, straining the capacity and willingness to help since fears of losing

¹⁶ Konrad H. Jarausch, *United Germany. Debating Processes and Prospects*, New York, 2013.

¹⁷ Ivan Krastev / Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed. Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, New York 2019; Kiran Klaus Patel, *Projekt Europa. Eine kritische Geschichte*, Munich 2018.

¹⁸ Jean-Claude Juncker, *Die Populisten irren sich fundamental*, in: *Tagesspiegel*, 19.02.2019; cf. John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations. A History of Eastern Europe*, Princeton 2020.

cultural identity and of terrorism sparked xenophobic resentment. Finally, the shocking exit of a previously ambivalent United Kingdom from the European Union after a contested referendum demonstrated the resurgence of nationalism.¹⁹ What were the causes of these reverses, what was their cumulative impact and how have the Europeans managed to deal with them?

Throughout the sovereign debt crisis journalists, economists and politicians predicted the imminent collapse of the Euro due to “the limited extent of political integration in Europe.” In 2012 Martin Feldstein drastically claimed: “The Euro should now be recognized as an experiment that failed.” This was not a result of “bureaucratic mismanagement but rather the inevitable consequence of imposing a single currency on a very heterogeneous group of countries.” Because the Euro was based on a political decision to harness German power to European integration, others argued that it was far from an “optimum currency area” and would never become an international rival to the dollar, since “the EU lacks the will, the ideas and the capacity to promote the Euro.”²⁰ Greece could only save itself by leaving the Eurozone. Yet in spite of so many dire forecasts the Euro has miraculously survived.

Though correct on the delayed response to the threat of Grexit, most doomsayers underestimated the political commitment to European integration and misunderstood the bargaining process. Compared with the concerted action of the Fed, the vacillation of the ECB and the EU Commission did look frustrating. But in some ways the response to the Eurozone crisis was a strategy of “failing forward” with members only making minimal concessions, and settling for the “lowest common denominator solutions” due to intergovernmentalism. Moreover, the electorate in the fiscally sound countries resisted paying for the seeming profligacy of its neighbors. “To date, this sequential cycle of piecemeal reform, followed by policy failure, followed by further reform, has managed to sustain both the European project and the common currency.”²¹ While frustratingly slow, this decision-making process has ultimately come up with enough pragmatic compromises to rescue the common currency.

At the same time, a throng of refugees created a “migration crisis” which overwhelmed all registration efforts at the border. Migration peaked in 2015, when 1,255,640 applicants

¹⁹ Anne Applebaum, A Warning from Europe. The Worst is Yet to Come, in: *The Atlantic*, October 2018 issue, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/poland-polarization/568324/> (05.07.2020).

²⁰ Barry Eichengreen, Europe, the Euro and the ECB: Monetary Success, Fiscal Failure, in: *Journal of Policy Modeling* 27 (2005), p. 427–439; Martin Feldstein, The Failure of the Euro, in: *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2012.

²¹ Erik Jones / R. Daniel Kelemen / Sophie Meunier, Failing Forward? The Euro Crisis and the Incomplete Nature of European Integration, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, 13.12.2015; cf. Matthias Matthijs / Mark Blyth (eds.), *The Future of the Euro*, New York 2015.

petitioned the EU for asylum, over one third of them in Germany alone, followed by Italy with 335,350, and France with 259,765. Previously the Dublin System had required asylum seekers to register at their first entry point into the EU – a regulation that put Italy and Greece on the front line. But when numbers exploded, the border authorities failed to keep up, shifting the problem to destination countries like Germany and Sweden.²² Since asylum decisions were a national matter, EU efforts to coordinate policies and redistribute migrants made little headway while the local authorities as well as charitable NGOs never had enough resources to care for the migrants.

As a result, rightwing backlash triggered restrictive responses from individual states as well as the EU as a whole. While the front-line countries received more financial help from Brussels, the xenophobic Balkan states also barricaded their frontiers, reducing registrations in Hungary from 177,132 in 2015 to 3,390 two years later. Even cosmopolitan places like Sweden cut down new arrivals from 162,459 to 26,325. In Germany Chancellor Merkel had great difficulty fending off attacks against her welcoming policy (“we can manage that”) from the xenophobic AfD party as well as her Bavarian coalition partner, the CSU. After years of dispute, EU leaders finally agreed to beef up Frontex, distribute migrants voluntarily, and try to stop newcomers before they reached the continent with processing centers in Turkey and North Africa.²³ Though late in coming, this package was a step towards a European solution.

Even more dangerous was the Brexit crisis that threatened the very survival of the EU by making one of its leading members abandon the Union. In contrast to the cosmopolitan optimism of the Remainers, the Leavers felt somehow threatened and abandoned. Woefully ignorant of the EU they saw it through the tabloid headlines that decried the financial chaos and migration onslaught. One favorite cliché, repeated time and again, railed against the “fact that unelected bureaucrats have got power over what goes on in this country.” Others were unimpressed by the EU’s halting response to the sovereign debt crisis which hampered the financial transactions of the City of London. Another favorite criticism was the lack of immigration control, since Britain was a small island that already had “too many people.” Taken together such complaints added up to a British sense that “we are losing our identity”.²⁴

²² Figures from Eurostat, Asylum and First Time Asylum Applicants, in: European Union, <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/news/themes-in-the-spotlight/asylum2015>>; cf. Jan Plamper, *Das Neue Wir. Warum Migration dazugehört. Eine andere Geschichte der Deutschen*, Frankfurt 2019.

²³ Steven Erlanger, *Despite No Commitments in EU Migration Deal, Victory is Declared*, in: *New York Times*, 30.06.2018; id., *Sachverständige sehen deutsche Einwanderungspolitik ‘in Balance’*, in: *Tagesspiegel*, 07.05.2019.

²⁴ *Brexiters' Opinions: Why They Voted Leave*, in: *Sky News*, 24.06.2016; cf. Tim Shipman, *All Out War. The Full Story of Brexit*, London 2017.

Ironically the Brexit shock seems to have had the opposite effect on the EU from what was anticipated. Instead of beginning “the disintegration of Europe,” the remaining 27 countries were able to develop a common negotiating position and to stick to it, even in the vexing issue of the Irish border. Since Theresa May failed to pit various member states against each other, her successor Boris Johnson will hardly have any better luck in extracting concessions. At the same time approval ratings of the EU in the member countries have noticeably improved to around seventy-five percent during the Brexit crisis. The threat of losing the unity and prosperity that had been achieved has apparently had a sobering effect on expressions of Europhobe sentiment.²⁵ In contrast to predictions of doom, the cascade of financial chaos, migration crisis and UK withdrawal has actually reinforced cooperation by showing what Europeans stood to lose.

Continuing Strengths

In spite of all the predictions of doom, Europe is still functioning quite well, in many respects perhaps even better than the United States. Most Europeans, for instance, can enjoy high speed train service, low cost higher education or long vacations while many Americans are stuck in traffic jams, have to pay high tuition or work longer hours. Contrary to neoliberal complaints, countries like Germany are highly competitive and have a huge trade surplus. Criticisms of social service fraud notwithstanding, states like Sweden enjoy a reinvigorated welfare system including ample child care that creates more equal life chances. And in contrast to Republican denials of global warming, some societies like Denmark have abandoned nuclear power and switched almost exclusively to renewable energy.²⁶ Why are these Europeans more fortunate in such issues and what might Americans be able to learn from them?

One of the continental strengths is the social market economy which makes Germany as well as its neighbors competitive. In contrast to the British preference for financial services, the FRG remains rather production and export oriented. After the collapse of mass manufacturing, German companies have focused on the upper market segment, relying on quality and design. Since their venture into IT hardware and software was only moderately successful, they have specialized in medium high tech such as machine tools and luxury cars with Mercedes, BMW, Audi, and Porsche, making VW one of the biggest auto makers of the world. At the same time,

²⁵ Caroline de Gruyter, *The Liberation of Europe*, in: European Council on Foreign Relations, 17.05.2017; *The Future of Europe*, in: Special Eurobarometer Report 479, Brussels, October-November 2018.

²⁶ Anu Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything*. In Search of a Better Life, New York 2016.

they have become leaders in green technology and alternative energy.²⁷ While Berlin favors fiscal discipline due to its negative recollections of two inflations, it also supports a generous welfare state in order to help the underprivileged segment of society.

In the Anglo-American media, this German model has provoked a considerable criticism for unnecessarily slowing down growth. Neoliberal commentators point to the rigidity of the labor market which protects employees against arbitrary firing. They also emphasize the many rules and regulations of Germany as well as the layers of bureaucracy which inhibit risk taking. The “non-market coordination, supplemented by a generous system of welfare protection” makes German goods often rather expensive. “Extensive cross-shareholdings, long term bank finance and co-determination” reduce the flexibility of the economy in responding to opportunities.²⁸ In spite of such problems, Germany as the EU powerhouse remains one of the leading export nations and amasses an impressive balance of payments surplus.

Another European strength is its “miraculous welfare machine,” even if its maintenance is increasingly called into question by global competition. The difficulties of high wage countries competing with lower wage Asian rivals have fostered the emergence of a neoliberal discourse that denounces the excesses of the welfare state. While a middle-class tax-revolt rejects the high level of taxation and insurance premiums, economists complain that this “tax wedge” creates “strong disincentive effects on effective labor supply” as well as “a sizable black market economy.” Neoliberal experts charge that the centralization and bureaucratization of the welfare state have ballooned the public workforce and hampered innovation by preventing the starting of new businesses. A new consensus has emerged “that it is both necessary and possible to streamline the Swedish model, while preserving its key elements.”²⁹

The reform of the welfare states has therefore focused on its long-term fiscal sustainability by shifting from maintaining income to activating labor policies. On the negative side, governments have reduced top rates of income and inheritance taxes so as to stem capital flight into tax havens. The ensuing budget shortfalls forced cut-backs in benefits, lowering the replacement rates of unemployment insurance and limiting public payments to a basic security level. On the positive side, governments have also invested in activating labor market policies

²⁷ Jeremy Leaman, *The Political Economy of Germany Under Chancellors Kohl and Schröder. Decline of the German Model?*, New York 2009; Thomas Hertfelder / Anreas Rödder (eds.), *Modell Deutschland: Erfolgsgeschichte oder Illusion?*, Göttingen 2007.

²⁸ Richard Bronk, *Which Model of Capitalism?*, in: *OECD Observer* 221/222 (2000), p. 12–15; and Clemens Fuest, *Soziale Marktwirtschaft. Exportschlager oder Auslaufmodell?*, in: *ifoSchnelldienst*, 8.11.2018.

²⁹ Subhash Thakur / Michael Keen / Balázs Horváth / Valerie Cerra, *Sweden’s Welfare State. Can the Bumblebee Keep Flying?*, Washington, DC 2003; Evelyne Huber / John D. Stephens, *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State. Parties and Policies in Global Markets*, Chicago 2001.

to retrain the jobless and make it easier for women and immigrants to enter the labor force. Both policy changes were inspired by the belief that the key to welfare was not a high level of income maintenance but rather a speedy reentry into work, even if on a low wage level.³⁰ Such reforms have not abolished but rather refocused European welfare states.

A final European strength is its fairly impressive response to the massive evidence of climate change. In an EU study, climatologists have ascertained that the decade from 2002 to 2011 “was the warmest on record in Europe, with European land temperature 1.3 degrees Celsius warmer than the preindustrial average.” Heat waves have become more frequent and longer, drying up rivers and ruining crops through drought in Southern Europe. At the same time, increasing precipitation in Northern Europe has created flooding of towns and farmlands on the banks. During the last decades, changes like the rise of sea levels have become so extensive that many scientists have started to claim that the earth has entered a new geological epoch, called “Anthropocene,” in which human beings have actually begun to transform the global environment.³¹

Even if they have not always lived up to their own standards, the Europeans are on the right track in fighting global warming through reducing their carbon footprint. The shift of the Trump administration to outright denial leaves the EU as the only major power pushing for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Led by Greta Thunberg’s *Friday for Future* movement, public opinion is solidly behind this commitment since “more than nine in ten respondents (94 per cent) say that protecting the environment is important to them personally.” One key challenge for Brussels is to get all of the EU members to follow the Scandinavian example in improving recycling, reducing energy consumption, and avoiding single-use plastic packaging. Another task is to convince major polluters like China, India, Brazil, and the US to follow its example in combining economic growth with environmental protection.³² In the end, Europe has responded effectively to the problems of competitiveness, welfare reform and environmental protection.

³⁰ John Kvist, *Activating Welfare States. Scandinavian Experiences in the 1990s*, Research Programme on Comparative Welfare State, Research Working, _passim_ ; Robert Walker / Michael Wiseman, *Making Welfare Work. UK Activation Policies under New Labour*, in: <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1468-246X.00147>>.

³¹ EEA, *Climate Change Evident Across Europe, Confirming Urgent Need for Adaptation*, 19.11.2012; Nicola Davison, *The Anthropocene Epoch*, in: *The Guardian*, 30.05.2019.

³² EU, *Eurobarometer Special Report 468*, Brussels 2017; 25 *Everyday Techniques to Save Environment*, in: *One Cent at a Time*, 11.01.2017; cf. Rüdiger Wurzel et al., (eds.), *The EU in International Climate Change Politics*, London 2016.

Common Challenges

Confronting unprecedented challenges around the globe, the liberal democracies will only be able to master them, if they once again work closely together. While American leadership has been faltering, the Europeans have not always overcome their national divisions. The Russian annexation of Crimea and occupation of Eastern Ukraine as well as the continuation of Muslim terrorism have revived the need for NATO, though its mission remains uncertain. Similarly, an ugly wave of populism has threatened democratic self-government on both sides of the Atlantic, pushing politics to rightwing or leftwing extremism. Finally, Europe's role in the world remains unclear since the transatlantic relationship is moving ever closer towards divorce while the rise of China is transforming the international order.³³ How can the EU and the US put aside their quarrels and once again work together to address the global problems?

Time and again US leaders have been frustrated by continental foot-dragging in response to security threats, not realizing that the reason for it was a fundamental difference in military cultures. While in European memory war was immediate, devastating, and personally deadly, in American recollections war was overseas, technological, and generally victorious. As a result, Washington has been more willing to employ force, entering a series of interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the like, while European NATO members have remained split on whether or not to support them. Resentment at having to bear the costs of global leadership fuels Trump's complaints about the inequality of sharing military burdens.³⁴ Though technological sophistication and superior resources have brought the US spectacular victories, excessive reliance on military force has often lost the peace when confronted with complex sectarian antagonists.

In contrast, most Europeans have developed a decided preference for employing soft power in order to achieve their objectives, since they consider war only as a last resort rather than a method for addressing global problems. As a result of their bloody history, they generally favor conflict prevention through public diplomacy and economic incentives rather than the use of force. Unlike Washington's recurrent tendencies towards unilateralism, the continentals try to work through international organizations like the EU, UN, or NATO, even if this is an exasperating process that requires compromise. Except for some limited interventions in former colonies, they prefer to invest in mediation, peace-keeping, and aid for reconstruction. Unfortunately, this non-confrontational approach has risks of its own, since dictators like

³³ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America*, New York 2018.

³⁴ Antulio Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan*, Washington 2014.

Milosevic or Putin (Russian militia) can count on European inaction when devising aggressive strategies.³⁵

The media are also full of laments about the crisis of representative democracy, predicting its imminent demise. Many citizens feel buffeted by impersonal forces such as economic globalization or electronic digitalization over which they have little or no control. Party politics seems to be a theater played by the political class in the capital, supported by remote media and has little to do with the cares of the common folk. Yet time and again, engaged minorities call for direct action, bypassing the cumbersome structures of democratic self-government. Emphasizing negative developments, the British political scientist Colin Crouch has coined the concept of “post-democracy” to predict its demise. However, the German theoretician Klaus von Beyme has rejected this doomsday view by suggesting the label of “neo-democracy” to denote the possibility of increased participation.³⁶

The relationship of populism to democracy is therefore ambivalent, since it “can work either as a threat to or a corrective from democracy.” In weakening dictatorships like in late Communism, popular mobilization can strengthen democratization through public liberalization, regime transition, and constitutional reform. But in weak democracies, populism can also hasten the erosion of self-government by diluting civil rights, undercutting representative institutions, and creating repressive systems that maintain only the shell of self-government. The nationalist regimes of Kaczynski in Warsaw, Orban in Budapest and Babis in Prague are an example of the dangers of populist degeneration.³⁷ It is this fear of de-democratization which rightwing movements have been inspiring during the last decade.

At the same time, the transatlantic relationship has been eroding since both partners are “drifting apart” due to contradictory interpretations of shared values. Most people on both sides of the Atlantic believe in free elections, a fair judiciary and an unbiased media. But for Americans freedom means “to pursue life goals without state interference,” while Europeans think that the “state guarantees[that] nobody is in need.” In the US people claim that the path to personal success leads through individual effort, whereas on the continent folks are more conscious that it also depends “upon forces outside of their control.” Many Americans understand security as the right to bear arms in self-defense, but Europeans tend to rely more

³⁵ Thomas L. Ilgen (ed.), *Hard Power, Soft Power and the Future of Transatlantic Relations* Aldershot 2006; Joseph S. Nye, *The Powers to Lead. Soft, Hard and Smart*, New York 2008.

³⁶ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge 2004 versus Klaus von Beyme, *From Post-Democracy to Neo-Democracy*, Cham 2018.

³⁷ Cas Mudde / Cristobal R. Kaltwasser, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2017; Paul Nolte, *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Munich 2012.

on resolving conflicts without violence.³⁸ In these and other issues, misunderstandings are multiplying because the Cold War generations are passing away, fraying the civil society bonds that once underpinned the transatlantic relationship.

Although Europe no longer rules the world, it is too early to write off the old continent as a global player. To be true, the EU is not a military force and may never become a superpower due to its cultural diversity. But Europe's splendid heritage is central to understanding the emergence of the modern world, spreading such values as scientific research around the globe. Moreover, with 450 million prosperous inhabitants the EU remains one of the top markets and a trading bloc with a global reach. At the same time the continental lifestyle is so attractive that millions of refugees and economic migrants are desperate to move there. Finally, the EU and its members are essential defenders of democratic governance and guardians of human rights.³⁹ While the world wars have reduced Europe's power and populism is testing its resolve, the continent continues to play a constructive role around the globe.

A Progressive Alternative

In the face of such multiple challenges Europe has shown a surprising resilience during the last generation. While the crises of sovereign debt, migration and Brexit quickly dispelled the post-Communist euphoria, the EU refused to crumble as its detractors predicted. But in spite of such strengths as competitiveness, social solidarity and environmentalism, it also failed to live up to idealist hopes for closer integration. Instead, Brussels frustratingly muddled through, coming up with last minute compromises to cope with problems at hand. Nonetheless, Europe gradually emancipated itself from US tutelage and developed its own version of Western values, thereby reversing the transatlantic relationship. No longer trying to copy the "American way of life" as during the post-war era, Europe has created a model of its own whose best practices might offer some inspiration for progressive politics in the US.⁴⁰

A first European trait that is worth considering is the use of some form of proportional representation in order to encourage more citizen involvement. In contrast to the vote suppression of the Anglo-American "winner takes all" process, this system more accurately reflects the wishes of the electorate by counting all the ballots even of smaller parties. To prevent fragmentation, it often includes a hurdle for parliamentary representation, which is set

³⁸ Konrad H. Jarausch, *Drifting Apart. Cultural Dimensions of Transatlantic Estrangement*, in: Hermann Kurthen / Antonio Menendez / Stefan Immerfall (eds.), *Safeguarding German-American Relations in the New Century. Understanding and Accepting Mutual Differences*, Lanham, MD 2006.

³⁹ Konrad H. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes. A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton 2015.

⁴⁰ Konrad H. Jarausch, *Rivalen der Moderne. Amerika und Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert*, in: Voker Benkert (ed.), *Feinde, Freunde, Fremde? Deutsche Perspektiven auf die USA*, Baden Baden 2018.

at 5 per cent in Germany. In contrast to the loose American structures, European parties are more disciplined bodies that are often supported by public funds. Since this constellation includes minority views, it leads to a higher participation rate during elections. The broader range of voices in parliament favors coalition governments which tend towards compromise, resulting in centrist policies.⁴¹ This proportional voting procedure, also used in the European Parliament, requires complex negotiations, but makes for better representation in the long run.

A second exemplary aspect is the generally peaceful international behavior of a Europe which has learned the lessons of two internecine wars. While individual countries still cling to national sovereignty in foreign and security policy, their cooperation in the EU is an attempt to avoid the repetition of earlier bloodshed. Though often disagreeing on controversial issues, Brussels speaks with a more united voice in matters of global trade, favoring a balance between free exchanges and protection of its own market. The European states are heavily involved in international organizations such as the UN and the WTO, supporting the liberal world order that emerged after World War Two. With the exception of the wars of Yugoslav succession, this preference for resolving problems by negotiation has pacified Europe and has contributed to reducing tensions in other crisis regions, even if it had occasionally to be supplemented by force.⁴²

A third worthwhile characteristic of the European model is the welfare state, which was propagated by the labor movement from the late 19th century on. Since neoliberals in the UK have prevented a Europeanization of social policy, it has largely remained a preserve of the EU member states. However, the expansion of benefits stopped during the stagflation and deindustrialization of the 1970s. Instead, the return to a market ideology fostered by a middle class tax revolt led to a considerable retrenchment in government services. But far from collapsing, the welfare state has been reformed, moving from subsidizing wage replacements to enabling recipients to re-enter the job market through additional training and child-care.⁴³ Though strained by demands for equality, migration pressures, and aging populations, support for social policy has continued, absorbing almost half of the budget of most European states.

⁴¹ Sonia Alonso / John Keane / Wolfgang Merkel (eds.), *The Future of Representative Democracy*, Cambridge 2011; Selen A. Ercan / Jean-Paul Gagnon, *The Crisis of Democracy. Which Crisis? Which Democracy?*, in: *Democratic Theory 1* (2014), p. 1–10.

⁴² Christopher Hill, *The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role*, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31 (1993), p. 5–38.

⁴³ Mel Cousins, *European Welfare States. Comparative Perspectives*, SAGE 2005; Rune Ervik / Nanna Kildal / Even Nilssen (eds.), *New Contractualism in European Welfare State Policies*, Farnham 2015.

Taken together, these traits of the European model constitute a progressive alternative because they provide a better quality of life for most citizens than the celebrated “American dream.” The latter offers perhaps a higher income, bigger houses, grander SUVs – but this is purchased by social inequality, a lack of health insurance, rampant racism and job insecurity. People who have lived in Europe prize its “social safety net” such as “access for all to child care, medical and parental leave from work, tuition free college, a living stipend, universal health care and generous pensions.” Such benefits unquestionably require paying higher taxes, but they also provide greater services that make life more agreeable.⁴⁴ Many Americans who would also love to enjoy such advantages might want to develop their own version by selective borrowing from the continent. Far from collapsing, Europe, in its best sense, has become a model for progressive politics.

Konrad H. Jarusch, *Embattled Europe. A Progressive Alternative*, in: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte, 2020, <www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/fdae-94898>.

⁴⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, *Biden, Not Bernie, Is the True Scandinavian*, in: *New York Times*, 11.03.2020; and Hartmut Kaelble, *A Social History of Europe, 1945–2000. Recovery and Transformation After Two World Wars*, New York 2013.