Book Review

Exploring the EU's Legitimacy Crisis: The Dark Heart of Europe

by Christian Schweiger
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Christian Schweiger's study was completed and published at a time of mixed feelings about the European Union. On the one hand, the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty founding the European Economic Community will be celebrated by a special meeting hosted in Rome by the European Council on March 25, 2017. On the other hand, EU's institutions and member-states are still troubled by the refugee/immigration problem; the rise of the extreme right and anti-European parties and the nationalistic and racist rhetoric calling for closing its borders; the consequences of Brexit implementation; the resurfacing of plans for a multi-speed, variable-geometry Europe, and the still unresolved issue of the economic crisis in Greece.

The sub-title "The Dark Heart of Europe" neatly distils the conjuncture of the historic progress of this "Strange Superpower"[1], the EU, with the dual intermediating state of its structures and policies still unfinished: on the one hand there are the sovereign nation-states, which are hostile to the institutions of European integration, although their long-term interests are aligned with it; on the other, there are the citizens of this supranational EU, who also constitute the foundation of the democratic legitimacy of those same nation-states. The contradictory nature of the role that the citizens of Europe are called to play in the legitimisation of the on-going European integration project lies at the heart of the study and is presented in eight chapters.

The book analyses the issues of the EU's history to date, in conjunction with aspects of its economic and political governance, both within its institutions and in the context of the common foreign and common defence and security policies sought-after. In style,

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1. David Buchan (1993). *Europe: the Strange Superpower*. Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing.

structure and chapter content, the book is a serious academic monograph as well as a work suitable for members of the general public seeking to enrich their knowledge about the EU. The study gains additional interest from the author's use of supporting material, including statistics and survey data, and judiciously selected passages from reports by politicians, eminent personalities and institutions concerning the progress of EU integration. The fact, too, that he has been able to make excellent use of relevant German-language literature, as well as that in English, is an additional advantage, and one that expands the scope of his arguments.

The study's main conclusion is that the progress of the EU has been marked by the emergence of a virtuous cycle of mutual benefits. Up to 1990, over the years of permissive consensus, nation-states and their political and financial elites cashed in on the added value of supranational experiments, while the peoples of Europe enjoyed the promise of the plus-value added through those experiments concerning goods of consumer democracy. After 1990, intensive transgovernmentalism gradually came to prevail, as the vision of European integration metamorphosed into a standardised, utilitarian method of governance, in which supranational promises were expendable and intergovernmental conflicts heightened.

The book's first three chapters discuss the history of European integration, and its basic theses may be summarised as follows: over the years, there developed an image of integration based on policies without politics through a never-ending zero-sum game of bargaining behind closed doors. The vision of European integration sought-after may have been the spill-over of a more general European mentality transcending national interests, but this was transmuted into the gift of the founding and development of an 'internal market', underpinned by the free movement of goods, people, services and capital. In reality, European integration became synonymous with market liberalisation via an elite technocratic web, at the expense of the political integration promised.

Conceived in the mould of the nation-state, the EU has been thus far shaped by the twin forces of those who "would, but cannot" (member-states/EU's ruling elites) and those who "could, but will not" (EU's ruling elites/member-states). As a superstructure, the EU has a tremendous democratic and political deficit and prioritises the technocratic *acquis communautaire* (the emphasis being on law and the economy). In contrast, democratic and political *acquis* are enjoyed by its member-states, since their primary constituent unit is the people as the sum of citizens with rights and obligations, while, at the same time, they seek to harmonise their national structures, as far as possible, with the *acquis communautaire*.

The author supports his observations with solid evidence, primarily through the catalytic example of the confrontational co-existence of the Union's three largest states, namely, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, both in the critical 30 years before Maastricht and since then until Lisbon and tackling the economic crisis. In every instance, each of those countries exhibits its own national superiority or assumes the personality of its leader, addressing the question of Europe in a similar manner. De Gaulle's mistrust of the UK, Thatcher's determined Euroscepticism, the endless Franco-German balancing

act between (in)formal transgovernmental bargaining and Germany's reluctant hegemony with Chancellor Merkel's personal stamp on micro-level and short term policy management, are just some of the crucial points along the path of European integration through the historical, political and economic weight of the Union's big three.

By contrast, the matter of European integration arouses far less interest and passion among its citizens. The EU may be a world player, and may dominate European and global political news, but within Europe itself its function and structure remain topics hard-to-understand, with little appeal for the general populace. The EU has become too overloaded with institutions whose function and democratic legitimacy are hard to discern to become a real part of the everyday life of its citizens, who, indeed, often feel confused about the activities of those institutions, and their own rights and obligations in relation to the corresponding national framework of institutions, rights and obligations.

The leaders of the EU rapidly recognised that it was not going to be easy to build a collective European consciousness based only on numbers, within the framework of a top-down policy inspiration. The study analyses with great clarity the EU's changes of tune since the experiment of the Constitutional Treaty. These reflect the frictions and conflicts at community level, residing mainly in the lack of political will, due to the absence of a political core that, as an assimilating mechanism, would propel the EU towards common decisions. The people were afraid of the new challenges and reacted emotionally, choosing the national refuge of security as regards their historically entrenched political and constitutional rights. The 'aristocratic' approach to everyday affairs of Europe's citizens and their entrenched democratic circumstances through the application of technocratic measures by Brussels bureaucrats was hard to swallow for the average European accustomed to social rights.

In the economic part of the study (Chapters 4 and 5), the author charts, with tables and survey data, the triumph of the technocrats and Europe's asymmetrical integration at the expense of a more general strategic plan regarding the EU's social face. More specifically, he notes the expectation, shared by most European citizens, of more collective action in health and social security matters at an age when, as he points out, the only dance on the programme is the neoliberal twist (p. 163) of flexicurity in the workplace and other areas. In an attempt to adapt to the relentless struggle of all actors in the globalisation of the markets for profits, the EU has become a 'blind aggressor' (p. 173) attacking all traditional rights and values of the European *acquis communautaire*.

Chapters 6 and 7, which constitute the political part of the study, present an analysis of, respectively, the cases of the European Parliament and the common security and defence policy. The failure of the Union's political and economic elite to institute functional structural reforms through the Constitutional Treaty seems to have been counterbalanced by the Lisbon Treaty, as an attempt to accumulate greater democratic accountability, transparency, and increased efficiency in the framework of bureaucratic functionality balanced between the central European institutions and those of the member-states. The

author exhaustively analyses this upgrading of the European Parliament, but, in practice, it remains the least representative institution in the EU's decision-making process, turning its democratic deficit into a crisis of legitimacy in the minds of Europe's citizens.

With regard to matters of foreign, defence and security policy, the study captures the current state of affairs, shaped by the replacement of the collective egocentrism of the victors of WWII, under cover of the common European perspective of a better future, by the isolated egocentricity of national navel-gazing, leading to a reprise of the vicious cycle of unbridled power. For the USA, as the fundamental pillar of the security of the western world, the EU's views and aspirations for more civilian and normative power are not enough: the US is demanding specific steps towards strategic rationalisation with the adoption of realistic initiatives and increased defence spending. Essentially, as the author points out, what the US is urgently asking for is comparable flexicurity in defence matters within the framework of NATO.

Chapter 8 presents the author's conclusions, and here he does not confine himself to the finding that the EU cannot continue with its "one size fits all" policy, essentially advancing the interests of states and elites, rather than those of citizens, based on the rationale of a technocratic Union whose decisions, taken in side rooms, merely sustain an semblance of democracy. The EU's legitimacy crisis, both within its members and institutions and against the Union's citizens, is of long standing and requires not only bold decisions, but also the time to implement these gradually. The author returns to former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's proposal for involving the member-states' national parliaments in European affairs as an interim measure; specifically, he had called for the creation of a second Chamber for the European Parliament, formed of representatives from the several national parliaments, as a means to increase direct and indirect participation of Union citizens, so as to construct a common European consciousness.

This book is more than just another conventional contribution to the study of European integration, swelling the literature on the subject. Rather, it is both a timely review of the European condition and a well-thought-out study taking a fresh take on the general discussion of the narrative on the future of European integration.