Cross-national Solidarity and Political Sustainability in the EU after the crisis

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Introduction

The shocks of the last decade have put the EU to an extremely severe test of political sustainability. Pessimistic views about the future abound in both academic and policy debates. Claude Junker (2016) himself evoked the notion of an ‘existential crisis’ of the EU – and in particular its core, i.e. the Eurozone - , as the Union has been facing unprecedented attacks from aggressive anti-movements and parties, the risks of (chosen or forced) exits and even of outright break-up. In this paper, we will take Juncker’s notion seriously by discussing the political roots of the existential crisis. Our main argument is that – beyond unexpected external shocks - such crisis is fundamentally due to a sharp misalignment between the new (‘ontological’) nature of EU after the introduction of the common currency, the authority structure put in place to govern the EMU, and – last but not least – the EU’s symbolic order, understood as the set of shared values and norms that link Europe’s peoples together – especially at the elite level.

After this introduction, the first section of the paper will highlight some features about the EU that unequivocally characterize it as a tightly coupled and novel type of collective entity. We will argue that, with the establishment of EMU, the Union has become a complex adaptive system and that any attempt to restore the status quo ante (as advocated by some Eurosceptic formations) is entirely unrealistic.

Section 2 will show that the extant authority structure of the EU is unsuited to steer this complex system as it lacks adequate instruments for addressing the common risks generated by integration as such, as well as the negative externalities arising from democratic interdependencies. These flaws make polity maintenance an extremely difficult task, continuously exposed to the risk of existential failure.

Section 3 shifts the focus to the symbolic order of the EU in a historical perspective. Building on secondary sources about the history of integration, we will highlight an almost paradoxical parabola. Between the Rome and the Maastricht Treaty, a number of farsighted politicians and supranational officials elaborated a quite advanced justificatory framework about market integration, which included explicit principles of solidarity and ‘sharing’ between Member States and regions. However, after launching an ambitious process of economic and monetary unification, EU leaders were unable to engage in a parallel effort to re-forge a justice-based value scheme calibrated on the novel properties and logic of functioning of EMU. Their efforts actually moved in the opposite direction.
In the fourth section we inquire whether an adequate solidarization of the EU is today a feasible option. To this end, we will present some empirical evidence drawn from a recent original survey carried out by us. Our data signal the existence of a considerable support – at the mass level - for pan-European forms of solidarity. While fully aware of the limits of mass surveys, we nevertheless argue that the potential for crafting a normative frame aligned with the nature and functioning of EMU as a complex adaptive system is less utopian than it appears and within the potential reach of responsible leaders. The conclusion wraps up and hints at some possible future scenarios.

**From an ‘economically engaged’ Community to a complex adaptive system**

Paraphrasing the famous Alexander’s dictum, to exist means to have causal powers (Alexander, 1920, p. 8). A sum of entities (individuals, groups, states) exists as a collectivity to the extent that ‘togetherness’ produces an emergent capacity to causally affect the subjective orientations and objective behaviours of the parts that join together. In this basic, ontological sense, the EU started to exist with the Rome Treaty and ever since its journey has been one of increasing causal consequentiality. In a political perspective, the original designation - European Economic Community - was partly a misnomer. It connoted the Union merely in terms of ‘want satisfaction’, i.e. as an institution aimed at maximizing economic welfare. We know that the Founding Fathers had more ambitious and ‘ultimate’ objectives: peace, prosperity, social progress within the various European nations, thanks to their cooperation and mutual opening (Burgess, 2002; Shore, 2013 Milward 2000). Using Weber’s vocabulary, their aim was not to set up a mere *Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft* (economic community) but rather a *Wirtschaftende Gemeinschaft*, i.e. a collectivity/organization engaged in economic activity, but pursuing goals which were wider than mere want satisfaction (Weber 1978, ch. 1). As declared in the Rome Treaty Preamble: the signatories are ‘determined to ensure through common action the economic and social progress of their countries, by removing the barriers which divide Europe’ (EEC Treaty, art. 2).

In fact, the Union did work remarkably well as a *Wirtschaftende Gemeinschaft* in the first decade and a half after its creation. Confirming transactionalist expectations (Deutsch, 1953), cross national exchanges and activities grew year after year at impressive rates. The natural force of territorial proximity and the elective
force of formally regulated preferential cooperation joined together to gradually transform the EEC into a superior and more cohesive form of community: a family of nations, underpinned by beliefs in togetherness.

The ‘family of nations’ metaphor was introduced by Frank Castles (1993) to connote a combination of broad affinities observable across a given set of countries. What this author had in mind were similar cultural and institutional attributes linked to geographical proximity and — crucially — a common past (e.g. in the Nordic nations) generating a shared sense of belongingness. The metaphor can also be used in a thinner but still meaningful sense when different countries enter into partnerships for deliberate policy coordination (Therborn, 1993). In this case, the commonality of purpose and the bonds within the new collectivity do not result from a common descent, but by shared forward looking objectives and modes of governance, as in the EU or other regional associations. In such type of elective families, political leaders play a key role in creating an inclusive context aimed at nudging citizens and socio-economic elites towards a ‘fraternalism’ that transcends the mere quid pro quo logic.

The gradual ‘familization’ of Europe’s national societies has operated on the backdrop of the wider processes of global trans-nationalization made possible by the fast growth of communication infrastructures, technologies and networks. EU-specific trans-nationalization has proceeded at a higher speed than in other regional contexts, as documented by a wealth of empirical research (e.g. Delhey, Deutschmann, Graf & Richter, 2014; Mau, 2010; Risse, 2015) and by the detailed comparative investigations on ‘horizontal Europeanization’ (Heidenreich, 2016). Such societalization (Vergesellschaftung) was largely the result of free movement provisions, which have allowed for concrete trans-national experiences to increasing numbers of people (Kuhn, 2015). Other direct and indirect mechanisms of ‘people-making’ (Eder, 2014) have also played a role: exchange programs such as Erasmus, targeted educational and cultural policies, financial incentives for cross-border cooperation and, more generally, the increasing presence of the EU and its symbols in everyday life (McNamara, 2017).

The establishment of EMU has undoubtedly built on this integrative background (a mix of communal and associational ties) but has also retroacted on it in significant ways. EMU has produced an unprecedented fusion of national economies by bringing to completion the single market and introducing a common currency. The categories which we have used so far, essentially rooted in classical sociology, are not very helpful for
capturing the real import of this fusion. A more promising analytical framework is offered by complexity theory, a multidisciplinary field which has elaborated a set of general concepts suitable for our purposes (Byrne, 1998).

When the degree of interconnection and the pressures to mutual adjustment among the parts of a collective goes beyond (or is made to go beyond, as with the formal establishment of EMU) a critical level, such collective becomes a complex adaptive system (CAS). This is the key notion of complexity theory. The emergent properties of a CAS are not merely causally active (the defining feature of a collectivity’s existence as such) but become irreducible and irreversible (Bechtel and Richardson, 2010; Sawyer, 2001; Wimsatt, 1997). Irreducibility means that it is virtually impossible to disentangle systemic from sub-systemic causal dynamics: systemic properties are non-localizable and non-aggregative. Irreversibility means that initial conditions cannot be reconstituted via decomposition. A CAS remains vulnerable to collapse, due to endogenous failures, external shocks and deliberate choices. But what comes after break-up is hard to predict and the status quo ante cannot miraculously reappear. The breakup of the euro (strongly advocated by some Eurosceptic parties) would not bring back to life the Greek or Italian economies as they functioned under the drachma or lira. Likewise, Brexit shows that it is very difficult for a Member state to disentangle itself from the EU order and certainly costlier than staying out altogether – or having stayed out in the first place rather than joining and then exiting. As aptly noted by Bauböck, ‘the European Union has become in this – prosaic and not at all romantic – sense a community of destiny’ (2017a, p.33).

Economists have just started to theorize in terms of complexity (Arthur, 2013). The promise and potential of complexity theory for macro-economics and the analysis of EMU in particular start to be increasingly recognized (Dow, 2016; Togati, 2006; Togati, 2012). A review of this debate is way beyond the scope of the present paper. Suffice it here to point to one indication which is highly relevant for our argument. Steering a complex adaptive system is difficult and demanding: nonequilibrium is the norm rather than the exception, initial local a-symmetries can escalate due to unpredictable processes of cumulative causation. A quantum leap in the policy making mindset is required: what matters is ‘getting meta-conditions right’ (Colander and Kopers, 2016, p. 18) – i.e. making sure that adaptive interactions within the novel aggregate be functionally sustainable and do not produce inefficient lock-in effects, dead-end path dependencies, undesirable asymmetries and hierarchies (Lustick, 2011). Contrary to mainstream economics and economic policy -
emphasizing equilibrium, determinacy, rule-based deductions - complexity economics recommends ‘putting carefully thought-out controls in place’ in order to safeguard a systemic resilience based on heterogeneity and dynamic adaptation. Conceiving the EU as a CAS allows us to diagnose its main structural problem – namely the misalignment between its irreducible properties and its authority structure.

**An inadequate political organization**

The establishment of EMU has been accompanied, since the 1990s, by significant institutional changes. During the crisis, new agencies have been created (such as the European Stability Mechanism) and decision-making procedures have been incisively redesigned (e.g. through the so-called Six pack and Two pack). Such reforms have contributed to face emergencies and avert collapse. They have originated, however, a legitimation vacuum (Fabbrini, 2017) and have fallen short of prompting that mind-set quantum leap needed to steer EMU qua CAS.

Two emblematic examples can be offered to illustrate this point. When, in the course of 2008, it became evident that the financial crisis might pose existential risks to the euro, EU leaders met in Paris and did discuss the option of setting up a joint EU stabilization fund. But they eventually discarded this idea and limited themselves to coordinating national responses. Merkel said that she would never use German taxpayer’s money to solve the problems of other Member States. As noted by Joshka Fisher (2014), this (non) decision shows the utter lack of shared responsibility within the EU Council. In particular, the former foreign minister points his fingers to the German veto, showing the failure of this country’s elite to understand that, due to the novel nature of EMU, a number of risks are now ‘common’ both in their causes and in their effects. Thus, they require common solutions.

The second example relates to the process of crisis management as lived by one of its key protagonists, Herman Van Rompuy. In an interesting memoir, the former President of the Council has recounted how, since 2009, European leaders were engaged in a collective learning process, often improvising solutions to unexpected new problems. The challenge was to understand ‘what belonging to a currency area entails’. Van Rompuy concludes that by 2012 the lesson learned was ‘about more interdependence: we are all in the same boat’ (Rompuy, 2014, p. 13). Without downplaying the genuine efforts made by leaders, what is surprising about
Van Rompuy’s account is the implicit acknowledgement that prior to the onset of the crisis, there seemed to be a very limited awareness about interdependence, let alone ‘complex’ interdependence and the need for systemic solutions.

The inadequacy of the EU’s authority structure has two main roots. First, despite the phase shift, EMU is still largely steered within the traditional frame of ‘methodological nationalism’, i.e. treating the Member States and their political economies as intrinsically self-determined units. But this summation logic can no longer serve as an effective compass (let alone as the only compass) for making policy choices and, even prior to that, for arriving at correct causal imputations. Public policies always suffer from interaction effects which are difficult to disentangle. Yet, with the advent of EMU, interaction effects have grown exponentially: local outcomes have multiple roots and some of them are not local, but systemic. To give an example, the Bank of Italy has estimated that when the spread between Italian and German bonds reached the peak of 600 basis point (2012), 200 points could be attributed to the rischio Italia (due to her high public debt) and 400 to the rischio euro (the possibility of a break-up of the common currency) (Visco, 2013). It must also be noted that interaction effects also result from horizontal ‘democratic externalities’ (Nicolaïdis, 2013, p. 351). Domestic leaders face problems for their own demos which are the consequence - sometimes quite visibly - of other EU demoi’s decisions and policies (Cheneval and Nicolaidis, 2016) and, in turn, adopt solutions that are very likely to generate cross-border effects (Bellamy, 2013, p. 505). National self-determination is obviously still possible and can make a great difference in terms of functional performance. But in a growing number of sectors, the separation of responsibilities between supranational, transnational and national actions and dynamics has turned into a difficult balancing act, subject to major epistemic constraints (after a point, we just cannot know).

The second root of inadequacy is that this delicate balancing act is largely performed by non-majoritarian institutions, entrusted with the task of identifying and applying rules and technical formulas for steering national fiscal policies. The belatedly acknowledged challenge of interdependence has been met, in other words, by adopting a technocratic mode of governance based on strict surveillance, discipline and sanctions and aimed at an ever-closer top-down harmonization of the standards and practices of Member States. This system rests on deep-seated (and mostly implicit) assumptions: budgetary stability and market efficiency are supreme goods; there is a ‘right way’ of guaranteeing them (and more generally of solving collective problems); economics (as a discipline and as a sphere of activity) must prevail over politics, especially
agonistic politics. The literature on Eurocracy (Chalmers et al., 2016; Earle et al., 2016) has underlined the affinities between this approach and some tenets of German Ordoliberalism, including its coveted notion of the *Soziale Marktwirtschaft*. Returning for a moment to the Weberian vocabulary employed above, within the Ordoliberal framework the safeguard of the *Marktwirtschaftsgemeinschaft* (the market sphere of a territorial community) becomes and end in itself. There is no need for the EU to pursue wider and superior goals. For Ordoliberalism, the ‘social’ is a natural by-product of the market (Hien and Joerges, 2018). The authority structure put in place during the crisis has not only proved ineffective in terms of outcomes but has also been eroding the necessary conditions for polity maintenance, unleashing the demons of populism and pushing them into attacking the EU as such: for its lack of democratic representation (Notermans and Piattoni, 2017), its constraining rules on budgetary decisions and its erosion of territorial sovereignty and border controls (Hutter et al., 2016; Kriesi et al., 2012).

*(Re)constructing the EU moral order: pan-European cohesion and solidarity*

Aligning the fact of togetherness (a much deeper togetherness than acknowledged and perceived, at least in the economic and monetary spheres) with an authority structure capable of effective functional steering and polity maintenance requires the mediation of an adequate symbolic framework or, more precisely, a ‘moral order’. Moral orders are sets of principles defining ‘what is proper to do and reasonable to expect’ (Wuthnow, 1989, p. 14) in associational relationships, accompanied by clear normative criteria ‘by which people and their activities are valued’ (Harré, 1987, p. 219). In the political sphere, a key component of the moral order are principles and criteria about sharing, i.e. what - and why- the members of the collectivity owe to each other. A certain degree of adequacy between such norms and the facts of socio-economic cooperation and institutionalized togetherness must obtain in order to buffer legitimation dynamics. It should be stressed that, for empirical political theory, the adequacy of a moral order is not gauged in substantive terms, i.e. as a conception of justice. Of course, the specific kind and features of factual togetherness do serve as ‘pointers’ (see for example Sangiovanni (2019) in this issue). What matters politically, however, is the capacity of this order to sustain legitimation, system performance and diffuse support. In Weber’s wake, empirical political
theory conceives of legitimation as a complex property and process, resting not only on right reasons (normative and instrumental) but also on affectual and habitual attachments.

Togetherness evokes ideas such as continuity and compactness: in a word, solidarity (from the Latin solidus, a firm and compact body). Solidarity is a contested concept (Stjernø, 2009, p. 2), but its prime meaning is relatively straightforward: it connotes, precisely, the ‘set of feelings of belonging together’ (Parijs, 2004, p. 375), which supports ‘attitudes of mutual acceptance, cooperation and support’ (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017, p. 3). Solidarity in this sense is partially grounded on ‘an interest in the integrity of a shared form of life that includes one’s own well-being’ (Habermas, 2015, p. 23). Such interest gradually becomes ethically charged: the shared form of life turns into a ‘moral community’ (Bayertz, 1999), whose members feel ‘co-responsible’ for the actions and desires, faults and merits of each other (Henckmann, 1998, p. 131).

Solidaristic norms have mainly a horizontal nature (cross-personal and cross-group) but inevitably involve also the vertical dimension (rulers-ruled). Political authorities are in fact the ultimate guarantors of togetherness as such, as well as of specific cooperative arrangements. Under democratic constraints, leaders have an interest in making sure that such arrangements are freely accepted as ‘valid’ in terms of compliance. In its vertical dimension, solidarity plays a key role for sustaining the Weberian ‘Legitimitätsglaube’ (Weber 1978: vol. 2, pp. 901 and ff.) – the belief in the state’s right to rule, beyond its coercive monopoly. In combination with cultural identity, solidaristic norms embodied in state institutions contribute to upholding diffuse support. Togetherness underpinned by sharing schemes and a moral order acquires a deontic charge. Since everybody has a stake, the fact of togetherness is internalized as a meta-norm. Just like security and peace, solidarity is a necessary condition for polity maintenance, serving as the ‘inner cement holding together a society’ (Bayertz, 1999, p. 9), the ‘glue that binds society and prevents it from disintegrating’ (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017, p. 5). The comparative welfare state literature has extensively documented the key role played by ‘social sharing’ in the historical process of state- and nation-building, especially after the extension of the suffrage (Flora and Alber, 1981; Flora, 2000; Mau, 2003). Normative theories of citizenship have in their turn stressed the importance of membership ties and social rights as sources of identity and legitimation (Bauböck, 2017b, 2017c)
The glue of solidarity is blatantly missing today in the EU (a similar diagnosis is offered by Kersbergen and Vis, 2019, this issue). The principles which predominate in the communication of Europe on the side of its leaders and which are embodied in the EU’s more consequential institutions and policies are mainly based on ‘economism’. Such views ignore that contributing to cooperative schemes normatively entails gaining a ‘stake in a fair share of the benefits made possible by them and an obligation to shoulder a fair share of the associated burdens’ (Sangiovanni, 2013, p. 220). The EMU made this requirement even stronger, as the initial cooperative scheme escalated to CAS status and the economic crisis exacerbated economic and social asymmetries and the related distribution of advantages and disadvantages, leading to systemic ‘structural injustices’ (Eriksen, 2017, p. 2). Simple reciprocity is no longer a sufficient ground for framing systemic decisions and more ambitious ‘principles of socio-economic justice [should] apply’ (Viehoff and Nicolaidis, 2015, p. 278). Yet their grounding need not be found in abstract moral ideals but can be internally derived, through principled reasoning about the necessary (and thus ‘non negotiable’) conditions which are required in order to achieve the very goals and values that the Economic and Monetary Union has set for itself. The current governance practices of EMU risk to produce functional failure and are thus self-defeating for the system as a whole. Hence changing such practices is at the same time a functional and normative necessity (Verovšek 2017).

The early architects of the EU were curiously well aware that economic integration (an instrument for peace and prosperity) required a solidaristic ethos to activate mutual feelings of community and sustain EU-building (Donati, 2018). In the early 50s, the first institutional moves towards integration prompted an articulated debate on the possible social consequences of the common market. An awareness emerged that integration could cause benefits and losses, despite its general purpose of increasing collective prosperity. The vulnerability of less developed areas was considered as the result of an undeserved ‘historical accident’, which could however encourage harmful dynamics of social dumping (Ohlin, 1956, p. 13). Both facts were deemed unfair. And on this ideational backdrop EU leaders created funds for inter-territorial redistribution not only for economic reasons, but also as political tools (Van Middelaar, 2013).

As is well known, the late 1960s saw the beginning of discussions and plans for the establishment of a full-fledged economic and monetary union. The key document was the Werner Report, which clarified that EMU’s objective was to create an area where ‘goods and services, people and capital will circulate freely […] without thereby giving rise to structural or regional disequilibrium’ (Werner, 1970, p. 11). To avoid the latter, cohesion
policies were needed, implying transfers of responsibility from the national to the Community levels’. The Thomson Report (CEC 1973) prepared with the view of establishing the European Regional Development Fund (set up in 1975), stated in turn that an harmonious development of the Community as a whole was a ‘moral and human requirement’: without sustaining local communities, the ‘idea of European unity’ would be doomed to ‘disenchantment’ (cited also in Suitcliffe, 1995, p. 8; Manzella and Mendez, 2009, p. 9; Brunazzo, 2016, p. 18). Some of the proposals that were put forward during the 1970s and 1980s by key institutional actors seem today extremely ambitious, almost revolutionary. In 1977 the European Commission appointed a high-level working group on the budgetary implications of EMU, chaired by Donald MacDougall. The final report suggested that a future ‘Federation in Europe’ should in principle adopt a public budget of ‘around 20-25% of aggregate GDP, as in the U.S.A. and the Federal Republic of Germany’, although MacDougall considered 5-7% a more realistic figure in the beginning (as it is known, the EU budget today only amounts to ca. 1% of aggregate GDP). The Report proposed a Community Unemployment Fund to cushion temporary setbacks, a budget equalization scheme for weak member states up to 65% of the average fiscal capacity, and a ‘conjointural convergence facility’ to counteract cyclical crises (MacDougall, 1977, pp. 12–13). It was through this sequence of initiatives that the ‘social dimension’ of integration made its silent, but tangible appearance within the EU symbolic and institutional framework and that the value of solidarity – in particular inter-territorial solidarity – came to be part and parcel of the European ‘ethos’ (Williams, 2010).

The 1980s key development was the completion of the single market – an ambitious economic objective. However, largely thanks to Jacques Delors, the need for an explicit, robust and fair social dimension was reaffirmed and linked to the moral framework of the 1970s. Delors underlined on several occasions the political rationale of this dimension as a tool to strengthen the Community as a political entity (Ross, 1995). The 1988 reform of the Structural Funds established for the first-time direct connections between the Commission and sub-national governments. This move had the objective of breaking the juxtapositions between paying and receiving member states: what Delors dubbed the vicious circle of la non Europe. By shifting the focus on regions, the Commission President sought to kill two birds with one stone: the common budget is for regions, not for states; all regions have a stake in EU-building and should have an interest in supporting its key institutional driver, i.e. the Commission (Barca 2009).
Since the early 1990s, the EU’s normative framework has been following two diverging tracks, in a sort of personality split. On the one hand, the new Treaties from Maastricht to Lisbon have articulated and strengthened the social face of the EU in their programmatic articles. On the other, the ideational rationale behind the EMU and the discourse which accompanied its implementation has moved in the opposite direction. In his detailed historical reconstruction about financial relations among the Member States, Kenneth Dyson has forcefully demonstrated how the pre-Maastricht ethos – which recognized the EU’s role in attenuating the negative externalities of integration and cross-national disparities – has gradually given way to an ethos fundamentally centred on national responsibility and on implicit moral judgements about fiscal ‘sins’ and ‘virtues’ (Dyson, 2014). Adjusting to EMU’s discipline has become a categorical imperative for domestic governments. Borrowing from Bagehot (1900), it can be said that the various Treaty revisions promoted a growing solidarization of the ‘dignified’ part of the EU’s constitutional order, but at the same time the ‘efficient’ part of this order moved in the opposite, de-solidarization direction. Needless to say, it was the efficient side that ran the show at both the practical and discursive levels.

The transition towards a ‘Union of national adjustments’ has been rightly seen as a change of paradigm in both descriptive and prescriptive terms (Beck and Underhill, 2017). The new paradigm assumes that the EMU framework - as currently configured - is essentially well designed and that structural adjustment is fundamentally a matter of doing the homework at home. If adjustment is seen as a matter of homework and rule compliance, then EU solidarity is not really needed. The derogatory connotation attributed to the idea of a Transfer Union in Brussels and in various Northern capitals testifies to this anti-solidaristic drift of the EU value framework, especially for the Eurozone (Dyson, 2014).

The weakening of the commitment to inter-territorial solidarity which had accompanied the birth of cohesion policy has been noted and documented by various authors (Begg, 2010; Mendez, 2013; Fargion and Profeti, 2016). The formal subordination of EU co-funding to Member States and their strict compliance with fiscal rules introduced by the 2013 reform is the most emblematic indicator of the predominance acquired by the new stability-oriented paradigm, which seems to utterly neglect the key functional and political role of solidarity policies. In line with Ordoliberal principles, the new paradigm assigns to the EU the limited role of providing the Ordnungspolitik which allows for institutional (or jurisdictional) competition. The monetary and fiscal regimes as well as a tough competition law should serve as bulwarks against interest group politics.
within the Member States, moral hazard and rent seeking strategies on the side of their governments. As has been aptly noted, this approach has generated the ‘myth of the beggar’: ‘The idea that the core countries should not provide financial assistance to peripheral countries because, if this were to happen, market pressure would disappear, and peripheral countries would have little incentive to implement reforms’ (Nicoli, 2015). This myth has rapidly resurrected the ghost of la non Europe: the clash between (‘deserving’) richer and (‘undeserving’) poorer Member States, saints and sinners, industrious ants and indolent grasshoppers (Dyson, 2014; Offe, 2015; Scharpf, 2017). There is a lively debate about the factors that pushed and/or allowed for the ‘ordoliberalization’ of the EU and in particular of the Eurozone economic governance (Joerges and Hien, 2017). The sudden explosion of the sovereign debt crisis, a new power constellation objectively favouring creditors vis-à-vis debtors, the latter’s low state capacities and their interest in bilateral bargaining with the EU and/or Germany rather than forging a horizontal coalition, the de facto hegemony acquired by Germany and – within its political system – by the Finance Ministry and the Bundesbank: all these factors have been highlighted by the debate (e.g. Caporaso and Rhodes, 2016; Moschella, 2017; Schmidt, 2015). Ordoliberalism has also permeated the culture of top officials within the Commission and the other EU non-majoritarian institutions (Nedergaard 2013), originating a mechanism of mutual reinforcement: Northern Member States demand/expect an Ordoliberal approach, EU institutions supply Ordoliberal solutions. For the purposes of this paper the genesis of the new paradigm is however less important than the sheer fact that it has now become predominant, fraught with unwholesome political consequences and hard to overcome due to the notorious ‘joint decision trap’ of the EU decision making system.

The view from below: more solidarity then meets the eye

The difficulty of further strengthening and solidarizing the EU is often imputed to the shift from ‘permissive consensus’ to ‘constraining dissensus’ on the side of national constituencies (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). No common identity, no demos, no electoral room for a political union, let alone a Transfer Union: this is the prevailing line of the reasoning. The constraining dissensus argument has obvious analytical purchase, but it also has two limits. First, by focussing on the demand side, it soft-pedals the role played by the elite in having prepared fertile grounds for the voters’ dissensus. Second, it tends to overestimate the extent and depth of such
dissensus. Can we confidently say that domestic public opinions share the same ideational framework of their elites and are unwilling to support a (re-)solidarization of the EU?

A recent survey offers a different picture (author*). Here we can only limit ourselves to highlighting those findings which are more pertinent and relevant for our general argument. The survey tried to capture some empirical referents of the moral order which is operative at the mass level. What do citizens consider as ‘proper to do and reasonable to expect’ in terms of EU solidarity? And, even prior to that, what kind of summary image do citizens have of the EU and what are its ‘sharing’ implications? Four different metaphors were proposed by the survey: 1) the EU as the ‘common home’ of all European citizens. This is the most demanding image, typically associated with the strong bonding ties that underpin fully fledged political communities and their sharing arrangements; 2) the EU as an ‘apartment building’ in which national peoples, with legitimate diversities, live next to each other. This metaphor comes close to the Weberian concept of ‘neighbourhood community’ (Weber, 1978, vol. 1, p. 360 and ff.), whose members are typically driven by a mix of mutual reciprocity and a modicum of benevolence; 3) a ‘playground’ (a commons) that facilitates mutually beneficial economic exchanges in the context of a juridical/market association. This image is the least demanding in terms of solidarity dispositions. What matters is procedural fairness and compliance with the rule of law; 4) a ‘sinking ship’ from which Member States should escape as fast as they can – the Eurosceptic view. Considering the entire sample (Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Sweden and the UK), the preferred image turned out to be the apartment building (30.1%), followed by the playground (26.0%), the common home (23.8%) and, finally, the sinking ship (20.3%).

[Table 1]

Some differences among countries remain evident, of course. In Germany, more than 54% of respondents declared themselves closest to the image of the apartment building, while only 6.9% of them opted for the common home. By contrast, in Italy (38.1%) and Poland (31.9%) people opted for the latter. In Spain (33.8%) and Sweden (34.5%), a relative majority identified themselves with the ‘playground’ option. Finally, 33.2% of French and 32.3% of British respondents saw the EU as a sinking ship that should be abandoned as soon as possible. The key summary indication that comes out of these findings is that the majority of Europeans share either a thick (common home) or at least a thin (apartment building) solidaristic ethos.
The survey also asked some questions about possible EU policies inspired by pan-European solidarity norms. As can be seen in table 2, almost all respondents (89.1%) agreed that the EU should ensure that no citizen remain without means of subsistence. In the EU6 sample this proportion was higher than 84%. In addition, more than three respondents out of four were in favour of a specific EU funded scheme to fight poverty.

Table 3 shows in its turn that more than 77% of respondents were in favour of an increase of the EU budget to support jobless people during a crisis. The fact that more than two thirds of Germans are ready to support a partial mutualisation of the risk of unemployment is remarkable, considering the reluctance of the German government when it comes to mutualisation policies.

[Tables 2]

In addition, more than three out of four respondents in the six countries were in favour of increasing the EU budget to foster social investment policies (75.9%). By contrast, ‘only’ 56% supported the introduction of Eurobonds. Country differences are quite sharp, reflecting the controversial nature of this issue in the context of the creditor-debtor cleavage. While in Spain and Italy, respectively 78.5% and 72.3% of respondents backed Eurobonds, only 37.3% of Germans did so (despite, we should note, the stark opposition on this issue by all German governments). In France the approval rate reached 48.3%.

[Table 3]

Survey data must be handled with care. They only provide snapshots of attitudes in one particular moment and we know that attitudes are rather volatile. Moreover, they indicate citizens’ preferences, but not necessarily their saliency in voting behaviour. Finally, responses are sensitive to the way in which issues are framed and formulated. For these reasons, surveys only register contingent ‘value expressions’, not necessarily indicative of genuine value judgements and of a stable and internalised collective moral order. We are aware of this. But these limitations should not be overrated. The fact that attitudes may easily change means in fact that they are plastic and thus amenable to cuing on the side of elites, through – precisely – issue framing and discourse. And it cannot be assumed a priori that value-expression are entirely devoid of internal and stable commitments. It must also be noted that the results of our survey have been robustly confirmed by other recent investigations (e.g. Gerhards et al., 2017). On this basis, it can be suggested that voter resistance and electoral constraints cannot explain that process of de-solidarization of the EU which we have described in the previous section.
Quite to the contrary, a ‘silent majority’ seems to potentially available for supporting a strategy of realignment between the deep togetherness created by the EMU, on the one hand, and the institutional and symbolic architecture of the EU, on the other. The absence of such strategy represents a clear failure of European political elites. As mentioned above, elective (choice based) partnerships based on forward looking objectives turn onto fully fledged families of nations to the extent that their leaders engage in some fraternal nudging. The exercise of ‘socioemotional leadership’, capable of developing a collective fraternal idioculture has become difficult in a world increasingly based on fluid social relationships, self-seeking behaviours and rational-legal authority (Brint, 2001). But the EMU elite has made long steps in the opposite direction, emphasising difference and apartness between national communities and their governments, denigrating, also symbolically, any mechanism of mutual support, promoting a historically unprecedented rule-based formalization of political authority: almost a deliberate recipe for undermining the conditions of polity maintenance.

Conclusion

The European Union is a multi-national territorial collectivity characterized by deep economic and monetary integration and a significant level of ‘societalization’. It has an authoritative centre endowed with rather extensive sovereign prerogatives and ultimate legal powers in key policy sectors. The ‘dignified’ part of its quasi-constitution (the Lisbon Treaty) includes an ambitious transformative project based on a panoply of goals and values, including justice and solidarity. The dominant and ‘efficient’ institutional and moral order which has emerged in parallel with the establishment of EMU is however out of synch with the nature and depth of socio-economic togetherness, the basic values of the EU as a political community and with the solidaristic ethos of its citizens, as revealed by mass surveys. Without a broad reconfiguration of its normative order, the durability of the EU polity is at stake. The nature of this reconfiguration is quintessentially political, in a double sense. First, it must be centred on political values: the search for commonality despite diversity, a shared moral commitment despite interest-based divergences, political equality despite disparities of power resources, sober brotherhood and fraternalism vis-à-vis different national vulnerabilities and needs. Second, the reconfiguration must be forged by political actors, by responsible elites capable of exploiting the solidaristic capital which seems to be available on the demand side. In the run-up to the German elections of
2017, both Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble repeatedly stated that in EU politics “this is no time for visions”. We disagree. As famously argued by Weber, world images and visions can sometimes operate as switchmen, channelling historical developments towards new directions. But ideas need political ‘carriers’. Today we see some promising ideas, but no available carrier. In this post crisis but still turbulent phase, the long-term sustainability of the EU cannot be taken for granted.

References


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