

Breaking with the rules that ruin the Union

Lorenzo Marsili in conversation with Barbara Spinelli¹

In your response to Verhofstadt², you have argued that before considering any constitutional change to the European institutions, we need to invest in policies capable of restoring citizens' trust in the European project. Failing that, any effort of Treaty reform will likely be hindered by a profound mistrust towards the EU. This two-step approach is also at the core of the manifesto of DiEM25³: stabilisation of the Eurozone first, and then constitutional reform. Can you tell us what kind of reforms you think are necessary to recover trust in the European project?

If we really want to defend the European project, it is completely illogical to start institutional revisions without first radically changing the policies that brought us to this multi-faceted crisis, so similar to that of the Thirties. The root cause is not only in the EU's economic-financial make-up, but also in its democratic failure, the disintegration of societies, and a loss of orientation and hope experienced collectively by European citizens. The mainstream version of institutional federalism is essentially no more, but yet it somehow still clings to the belief that modifying the balance of power between the different bodies of the Union will be enough to solve all the current problems. But the revolution has already taken place, or rather, it is still under way, and we know that it has produced what Jürgen Habermas calls “post democratic executive federalism”. The

1 | This interview was first published in openDemocracy in August 2016.

2 | “Il Cigno Nero che Verhosftadt ignora” Barbara Spinelli July 2016 (<http://barbara-spinelli.it/2016/07/14/il-cigno-nero-che-verhofstadt-ignora/>)

3 | DiEM25 (Democracy in Europe Movement by 2025) is a pan-European and cross-border movement founded by Yanis Varoufakis in 2016.

repercussions of a breakdown of the Union would be so great that the order of priorities must change. Politics is not losing importance, but policy is the priority today. European politics will hopefully be of a federal nature, but such a goal must be the consequence, and formalisation, of a fundamental reconsideration of the policies adopted as of now. In the EU, we have arrived at a tipping point where the obsessive insistence on the institutional method – be it intergovernmental or community-based – is not sufficient alone. It is a technical masking of a political substance that does not change, of a European project that does not want to become either political or democratic, but deliberately tends towards a programme of oligarchic domination.

In other words, we are facing a clear strategy: the aim is not advancing towards a normal democratic government, but towards a so-called administrative “governance” that serves to protect the interests of small power cliques and privileged groups, insulating them not from the markets, but from the uncertainties of universal suffrage and of constitutional democracy.

Why should we believe that a shift of gear is any more likely today, after eight years of avoidable crises? We are yet to hear of a convincing argument as to how any ambitious and disruptive proposal would be able to survive the haggling between 27 Member States, all of which have national vetoes, several of which are ruled by openly nationalist and xenophobic governments, and some of which have deeply ingrained economic obsessions. We have seen it all before: ambitious proposals for investment reduced to the risible Juncker plan; a migration agreement reduced to a few hundred relocations from Greece and a bribe to Turkey’s Erdogan. And then there is the ineffective Youth Guarantee, and a dysfunctional Banking Union. Why should it be any different this time?

Clearly the current Treaties are not enough. And we definitely need an authentic Constitution, signed not by the governments of the Member States but starting, as the American Constitution does, with the words: “We, the people ...”. However, policies must change before this. How can this be done with the current institutions? I am convinced that a democratisation of their mechanisms and their decision-making would be a first step, although certainly not the only step to be made. If the heads of government, the ministers, the commissioners, and the members of the Parliament felt themselves under permanent scrutiny from well-informed

citizens (and thus “enlightened”, according to Kant, and treated as adults), they would have quite some difficulty behaving as an oligarchy. It would not be possible for the Eurogroup to take a decision against the opinion of a Member State, as happened in the meeting of 27th June 2015, when the former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis demanded for the Greek objections to be formalised, and the legal services of the Union replied that it would not be possible, in light of the fact that the “Eurogroup is not mentioned in the EU Treaties and operates as an informal grouping. As such, it is not subject to any written rule”.

Concrete transformation plans could come from citizens and not only from the European Parliament. Transparency is important but it is not everything, the citizens ask for more. They demand first and foremost a true European New Deal, which would create jobs and fight against poverty and growing inequality. The proposals are many: from those illustrated by Yanis Varoufakis, to those which came out from the Citizens Initiative “New Deal 4 Europe” (tax on financial transactions and carbon tax for investments in ecologically sustainable growth). Only by starting a New Deal will we be able to face the refugee crisis, build an economy based on solidarity and avoid falling into xenophobia, racism and widespread violence.

Agreed. But who are the subjects capable of filling the gap? We hear over and over a string of empty exhortations to build “another Europe”, but few believe in this rhetoric any more. National parties do not seem interested, or able, to see beyond the failed Euro-reformist rhetoric (Francois Hollande was the first to promise a transformation of austerity policies – we are now left with the Loi Travail and the State of Emergency). Transnational parties, a series of acronyms without a true strategy or common campaign, have proven to be unfit to lead a democratic revolution. Is it perhaps time to imagine a true European party? Or maybe even, in light of the next European elections, to imagine a “democratic front” to bring different political and social forces together with a simple but firm reform programme of the Union? Could this include disobeying EU rules?

In reality, the subjects are there, one just needs better eyesight, the language, the curiosity and the capacity to listen and meet halfway, because this is what is needed so that we are able to tell them, as the old prophets did, “here we are”. Here not only to represent you, but also

to understand and spread what you think, what you fear, what you need, what has happened to you and what has let you down. Class war has not ended, even if the social question naturally presents itself in new clothes today. It is not only that the representation of these subjects is missing, and that all intermediary bodies of society – beginning with the trade unions – are under attack, but there is something more: the division today is not between who is “up” and who is “down”, but between who is “in” and who is “out”. We are faced with old impoverished classes, with a new, downgraded middle class full of fears, and with new classes that are deprived even of a name. And all of them tell us, as the Commendatore in Don Giovanni: “Ah tempo più non v’è” – “Your time is up”. We have to speak with these groups, so as not to fool ourselves into denial about the reality we are stigmatising.

Let us not keep to ourselves the fact that Syriza’s failure has left many, far-reaching wounds, to the point that millions of citizens today just do not believe that there are possible alternatives any more, and this is not only in Greece. Quite rightly, they think that universal suffrage has been undermined. We have to admit that democracy, as a whole, is left with broken bones. The capitulation of the Syriza government after the referendum of 5th July 2015 has to be recognised and represented as something similar to the primal scene, which unsettles the child who was used to imagining his parents as gender-neutral, as “innocents”. Once the primal scene has been recognised, you can decide not to consider it, or pretend to have not seen what you have seen, but the effect remains and it will be devastating if you do not go forward with some precautions and new knowledge.

Such a denial of reality is also one of our ruinous deficiencies. The Greek traumatic breaking point is still being hidden, or worse, is being totally repressed, or embellished, even by a great part of the radical left who keep demanding “another Europe”. What we must restore is the relationship with reality and the truths that it tells us: the reality of a humiliation which Syriza does not recognise, the reality of Trump’s success, the reality of Brexit, the reality of a Polish society that has had enough with the pseudo-liberal lies of the post-communist élite and has given the majority to Jaroslav Kaczynski and the PiS.

You ask me what can be done concretely in order to build a European transnational party, a sort of “popular front” that could stand in the next European elections with a programme of rupture with the powers-that-

be of the Union. First of all, we have to clarify a few concepts by asking ourselves some fundamental questions: what does it exactly mean to take back our sovereignty? How do we distinguish between popular sovereignty and national sovereignty? What is the cost of a non-Europe? What are the demands of the impoverished and expelled classes? And what is the meaning of the rupture strategy you have mentioned?

Then we have to respond to the fears of the people, voluntarily provoked by the hegemonic powers, but fears nevertheless. Let us take the migration and refugee question as an example: we have to condemn the indecency of the construction of walls and the carrying out of collective expulsions by Member States, with the complicity of the European Commission, and we have to denounce their will to bolster the extreme right with the purpose of using it as a scarecrow deterrent. But at the same time, we must help to get rid of the feeling of fear of our fellow citizens, because this sentiment too is a “reality”.

We have to break with the rules that ruin the Union, but we must also reassure citizens: it is a matter of urgency. It is useless to say that we will “mobilise the masses” against racisms and neo-fascisms, because the masses we are talking about simply do not exist as they did, and a great number of them have ceased to vote anyway.

This much we have learnt over the last years: it is EU decision-making itself that is broken and unable to result in coherent and ambitious policies. We must, at some point, talk about reforming the European institutional structure. But this is a tortuous path. The so-called “Schäuble plan”, namely the integration of the Eurozone through the appointment of a European Finance Minister essentially tasked with enforcing the austerity rule-book, seems a step in the wrong direction. Many speak about the need for a Constituent Assembly directly elected by European citizens. Others, such as Piketty, advocate the idea of a Parliament of the Eurozone. What is the most promising path to trigger a reform of the government of the European Union?

I agree with the idea of a Constituent Assembly, but without leaving the project in the hands of an intergovernmental process. It already happened once, in 1984, when a constitutional project put forward by the European Parliament was devitalised and deformed in this way.

The Schäuble plan you are talking about goes in a completely different direction. It does not even limit itself to proclaiming a European Finance

Minister. Since Great Britain voted for Brexit, Schäuble is recommending the simple return to an intergovernmental Europe, to the old “balance of power” which caused two world wars in the previous century. He distances himself from any federal vision in order to save and protect the austerity policies imposed during these years. The very word “vision” is abhorred. The key expression today, according to Habermas, is the following: “No more vision, everything by now is just a question of “Lösungskompetenz”, of solution skills”. The goal of the German establishment, and Schäuble, is to consolidate the definitive victory of ordoliberalism.

Every State must first reorder its accounts, and only then common economic resources, cooperation and New Deals may come. In the international headquarters nothing must be decided in common; at most, it is a place of information where the strongest impose adjustments on the weakest. Ultimately, the essence of this doctrine, pure and simple, is a return to nationalism. A nationalism that today also risks contaminating the minds of left-wing anti-austerity forces. To them, I would like to say: be careful, in the battles for an “exit” from the Euro, or the Union, you risk finding at your side not those who want to shield Europe from the global markets, but the barely masked nationalism of Wolfgang Schäuble.