

# Our European capacity

Which Europe do we want? Rediscovering Hannah Arendt's concept of integral federalism

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In *Our European incapacity*, written already in 2011, Etienne Balibar lucidly describes why Europe did not become the democratic and social Europe aspired to in the Treaty of Maastricht – which envisioned a Union of Citizens based on coherence and economic convergence – but rather became technocratic and dominated by sovereign nation states that are not delivering good policies for many European citizens. A fact that is now triggering a wave of populist movements all across the Union, to the embarrassment of national elites.

Balibar offers as explanation that, as much as national elites were willing to Europeanise the market and currency, they were unwilling to do the same in the political arena, as it would have undermined their own power basis in the nation state. As such they administered their national democracies through largely neutralised grand coalition schemes lacking political contours, leading to a perfect erosion of state functions on the national level. It basically suited them to cling to fictive national power while accepting economic governance on the European level,

“Fiercely resisting every idea to build channels of communication and processes of mutual recognition (through education, but also social struggles and political campaigns) which would allow the peoples to confront their histories and merge their interests. For this would also have challenged the monopoly of representation of these ruling classes, both internally and at the supranational level and thus

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1 | Guérot's response to Balibar's text was written in November 2016.

their remaining the inevitable intercessors of 'their' peoples with regard to the European institutions." (Balibar 2011)

In other words: the famous, transnational 'politicisation' of European citizens, where the arbitrage of political decision-making could have been organised beyond national state sovereignty, never took place.

With the European Council becoming ever more important in decision-making in recent years, the primacy of the nation-state in a *Schmittian* notion of political conflictuality was kept within the EU's institutional structures, to the detriment of European citizens who could have benefitted from transnational European policy solutions, for example a European unemployment scheme. As Pierre Rosanvallon puts it, the EU was built on a lie and the lie is that the EU is equally a union of states and a union of citizens, as promised in the Treaty of Maastricht. The union of citizens does not exist. Actually, quite the opposite; European citizens are often the hostages of European Council decisions, opposition to which is not possible.

Should there be astonishment or embarrassment about a popular reaction to this violence of democracy at the national level, while not reconstituting it on the European level? Rather not. In the absence of any meaningful political content, policies were said to be without an alternative – which is the opposite of the political itself. The problem is not anti-elitism, but the fact that European populism is framed as a national movement.

Today's setting of anti-elitist movements across the union arguing against the national and European political class is the consequence of the fact that *one market* and *one currency* have never been turned into *one democracy*. Before digging further into today's populist problem in Europe, it should be reminded that anti-elitism is *a priori* a good thing, and by no means 'populist' per se.

Being against the establishment was also the main feature of the 68ers, hardly a right wing movement. One of their most extravagant slogans was "Who sleeps twice with the same person, belongs to the establishment". If any criticism of the system is called populism and shut down, democracies end up change resistant and lose the very capacity of a democratic system – in contra-point to authoritarian systems – which is precisely to integrate legitimate critics and to make things better. This is exactly what happened

to the EU, which, falling short of the capacity for reform ended up with a monolithic inertia, triggering popular protest.

The anti-establishment claim thus does not yet make the right-wingers 'populists'. The problem is the anti-pluralistic spin, with fragmented groups pretending to represent *the people*, for example the German Pegida militants who shout "We are the people." Yet, who is the We? The German nation that they represent?

In fact, populism rather splits nations than uniting them. Brexit is the best example. If Theresa May has one problem today, it is to find the unity of the British nation. Whereas the very idea of Brexit was to defend the British identity against the European continent, the country is today deeply divided from Scotland to youth, to the City and the North of England, to Wales and Northern Ireland. The re-nationalisation discourse only distorts or hides a struggle about economic concepts, upon which the losers and winners of globalisation have different preferences – and needs. De facto, regional conflict about appropriate national economic policies is today's substitute for the former class conflict. In other words: what suits the City of London economically is not necessarily good for the deindustrialised regions in Northern England. Austria and France will be next to experience the way populism splits the nations it pretends to unite – the discourse of national pride only hides a conflict between citizens. Even more: with populism breaking up nations, the long-expected politicisation of Europe, which the 'United States of Europe' could never produce, is finally happening.

What we are really experiencing is not the renationalisation of Europe as most of the national press tries to make us believe. What is really shaping at the horizon is the latency of a European civil war between the protagonists of an agenda of opening and those defending an agenda of closing and this civil war is transnational on both sides. It is a fight among European civil society – progressives and conservatives, if not reactionary forces – about the future European social and political contract and the values underpinning it. On the one hand, there is a liberal to progressive civil society across Europe standing in the tradition of European humanism and the heritage of the French revolution; liberty, equality and solidarity. On the other side, there is naturalism, if not proto-fascist communitarian thinking based on ethnic grouping, scarifying liberal society in favour of a closed community.

The European identitarian movement recently organised a huge conference in Linz, Austria, under the title “Defending Europe”, gathering people from FIDES, UKIP, AfD, FPÖ and the Front National. In a way, we are experiencing the cosmopolitanism of identitarian movements as *contradictio in adjecto*. One could even argue that the populists are the real Europeans, as they, for the time being, do a better job of organising transnationally than the scattered left or liberal parties on the European continent. The irony of history might produce the first truly transnational party formation by today’s European right-wingers, realising what the socialist international failed to achieve a hundred years ago.

The expression of European civil war comes from the Austrian painter Franz Marc, who coined it in the midst of World War I to describe the struggle between the *European spirit*, as he called it, in defence of European humanisms and the cultural heritage of the French revolution on the one hand; and the *Ungeist*, leading to renationalisation, militarisation and finally fascism. Yet, the fight is not between countries, that is the point. Neither is it a fight between countries today.

“We must therefore reconstruct Europe as a federation of original and diverse nations, leaving aside the myth of their State-sovereignty, but mutually enhancing their power to create and collaborate.” (Balibar, 2011)

This comes very close to what Hannah Arendt describes as ‘integral federalism’ in her political grammar of founding. Putting aside the myth of state sovereignty could indeed pave the way for the next European project, a project beyond nation states – as the founding fathers of the EU also aspired. “Nous ne coalisons pas des Etats, mais nous unissons des hommes”, wrote Jean Monnet, as his vision of a radically de-nationalised European society. The shift from a Union of States to a Union of Citizens would go beyond the classical concepts of statehood-ness and sovereignty as brought to us by Hobbes or Rousseau. Hannah Arendt is in search of the hidden tradition of freedom, in favour of spontaneous forms of political organisation, among citizens, or towns or small entities, which form republican bodies.

Doing so, Arendt clearly distinguishes between sovereignty and freedom, because sovereignty contradicts the principle of plurality, if sovereignty is the absolute right of self-determination and the right of non-interference. Yet, nobody is sovereign, as (wo)man is not alone on

earth. Sovereignty is only a (weak) concept to deal with plurality, all too often through arbitrary rules placed over others. Freedom, however, is the existence of plurality and intersubjectivity.

“The famous sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion, which, moreover, can be maintained only by the instrument of violence, that is, with essentially nonpolitical means ... If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.” (Arendt 2006: 163)

State sovereignty is a reductive concept; Hannah Arendt thinks about the organisation of political power without (state) sovereignty.

This is how she designs her concept of *integral federalism*, in line with the writing and thinking of Denis de Rougement, Franz Marc or even Albert Camus, who in the 50s, at the moment when the last European projects was taking shape in the form of the Rome treaty, advocated strongly against a *state based, intergovernmental federalism*, which ended up, as Hannah Arendt predicted, in the hollowing out of European democracy. What Jürgen Habermas has called “executive federalism”, leading to the usurpation of people’s freedom by nation states.

The notion of the nation state always mixes fatherland, state, nation and language. Yet, a federal structure, writes Denis de Rougement (de Rougement 1994: 223) cannot be based on *one* political feature – the nation state – alone, as the nation state amalgamates at least four different layers: patriotism, ideology, administration and culture. History, geography, language, tradition or economy are not embedded in *one* nation state, but can only be federated through *spaces of citizen participation*, through small communities, which do not request *absolute sovereignty*.

The Europe that we want is thus more the one of Franz Marc, Hannah Arendt and Denis de Rougement, which is the concept of a social *federalism of civil society*, or *integral federalism*, rather than the one of De Gaulle, Adenauer, De Gasperi or Paul Henri Spaak, who finally did not dare to deconstruct the nation and ended up in a concept of *intergovernmental federalism*.

The Europe we want frees people from power structures embedded in a nation state; it brings together regions and towns in autonomous political decision-making procedures; it frees the notion of democracy from the notions of territory, state and people; and frees the concept of

Europe from the idea of integrating states so as to unite people; providing real freedom to European citizens.

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