

3rd Annual Conference, Nicosia, 02/06/2018

Making sense of the multidimensional crises of the European project

Umut Bozkurt

European project is today defined by a set of crises: economic weakness, a deficit of democratic accountability, the perceived failure of multiculturalism, the rise of austerity citizenship, the increasing radicalization of European Muslims and the rise of the extreme right and xenophobia. The main argument of this paper is that these crises significantly undermine the sense of belonging to the European project today.

Following the global crisis of 2008, which had severe repercussions on all European economies, governments across the continent instituted austerity measures to force working people to bear the cost of the financial meltdown? Even though a significant reason for the crisis was the recklessness of the bankers, 'the tiered and hieratical system in Europe with Germany, Austria and the Netherlands at the top had sought to present the Eurozone crisis as problems of the fiscal indiscipline of leaders in Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain'. Under Chancellor Angela Merkel Germany has espoused a destructive austerity policy that has demanded budget cuts and opposed stimulus programmes that could help revive the struggling economies of southern Europe. Consequently, draconian cuts in public expenditure created major problems in societies such as Greece and Spain where unemployment soared to over 25 per cent. Yet despite these measures, it is not possible to argue that the system has stabilised as Europe is now facing deflation and a deepening of the economic recession.

One of the significant outcomes of the global financial downturn and the austerity measures that were implemented in the aftermath was the resurgence of Europe's far right. In France, Marine Le Pen's Front National (FN) is on the rise. In an environment marked by the weakness of the left and Hollande's inability to resist austerity measures, the FN exploited the fears of the economically disadvantaged and politically deprived disgruntled citizens struggling with high unemployment, property repossessions and an inability to obtain credit. Le Pen promotes a programme that calls for a moratorium on immigration and the implementation of a 'French first' policy on welfare benefits and employment, as well as restoration of the death penalty. This discourse paid off. In the EU elections of 2014, the FN emerged as the dominant party, receiving 25 percent of all votes.

The resurgence of the far right in France, and also in Germany, Greece, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK, means that there is a chorus of national leaders who argue that 'the open borders and liberal tolerance championed by the European Union are allowing a virulent jihadist virus to infect our countries' and 'the real culprit is Islamic immigrants taking jobs away from the native-born'. In the UK Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party wants to leave

the EU and criticizes multicultural policies for creating a jihadist 'fifth column' in France. UKIP won 28 percent of the vote in the May 2014 EU elections. The anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats Party gained 13 percent of the vote in Sweden in 2014. In Greece, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party entered the parliament in 2012. Its slogan was 'so we can rid this land of filth'.

The rise of the far right in Europe is evidence of the decreasing support for the EU and the idea of European integration. But the erosion of the sense of belonging to the European project, as demonstrated in data produced by Eurobarometer showing the change in percentage of citizens who trusted the EU between 2007 and 2012, manifests itself more broadly than just a turn to reactionary extremism. Apart from Finland and Sweden, there has been a marked decrease in the number of citizens of EU member states who support the European project, particularly so in Ireland, Slovenia, Portugal, Spain, France and Greece.

The most pronounced drop in support for the EU was recorded in countries facing a deeper economic crisis. Nevertheless, trust declined even in countries that have not been under direct conditionality or pressure from the EU and the International Monetary Fund. Declining trust in the EU reveals the crisis of legitimacy the entity has been facing in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis.

The EU decided to deal with the financial crisis by imposing austerity measures on democratically elected governments as a result of decisions taken by a closed group of self-serving and democratically unaccountable decision-makers. Increasingly, Europe is turning into a Europe of markets in 'which non-democratic institutions make use of blackmail and fear to impose unpopular decisions. The problem is that, in the aftermath of 2008, the EU parliament has seen its visibility reduced whereas the closed group of decision-makers has gradually assumed greater weight in policy making. The European Central Bank, created to be independent of democratic controls, has assumed enormous power as it decided whether to create money and how to distribute it. Decisions taken with very little transparency were then imposed on democratically elected governments that led to them losing their sovereignty in the process.

Europe's crises of legitimacy and democracy are coupled with a crisis of citizenship. The Marshallian concept of citizenship that had become part of the new post-war consensus is today giving way to austerity citizenship. According to T.H. Marshall, citizenship is a **status**, given to **all full members** of a community, that has three main elements: civil (freedom of speech, thought, faith, liberty of the person, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, right to justice), political (right to participate, execute power) and social rights (right to adequate standard of living, *right* to education, *right* to housing). He emphasised that all three elements were interconnected: first, civil rights were gained, followed by political and social rights. Marshall's model became the predominant model for understanding citizenship in liberal democracies after the Second World War.

After 1945 European societies co-opted their working class members by providing them with the basic welfare that necessarily flows from the interconnected rights at the heart of the Marshallian model of citizenship. Yet following the decline of welfarism in the aftermath of the economic shocks of the 1970s, the rise of neoliberalism and the fiscal retrenchment

introduced to tackle the 2008 crisis, the politics of austerity is producing what Nicos Trimikliniotis, Dimitris Parsanoglou and Vassilis Tsianos define as 'austerity citizenship'. They argue that 'Citizenship is in this context the specific tool of sovereign governance that regulates the balance between rights and representation and renders certain populations as legitimate bearers of rights while other populations are marked as inexistent', and driven towards illegalization and invisibility. Who are the new 'rejects'? The new homeless who lost their homes after the economic crisis, the unemployed, migrants. The exclusion of the groups who were co-opted into the system in the past leads to destructive social upheaval, such as the attacks carried out by jihadis recruited from the poverty stricken suburbs of French and Belgian cities.

Furthermore, the imposition of austerity citizenship perpetuates the image of a fortress Europe that is anything but multicultural. Subaltern migrants are blamed for undermining 'our' welfare state. Immigrants are scapegoated due to their inability to integrate into 'our' liberal norms because they are allegedly predisposed towards fundamentalist Islam/criminality/terrorism. Even though it is the neoliberal policies which generate the conditions for the exclusion, marginalization and victimization of migrants, austerity citizenship serves to legitimize the exclusion of certain groups and pushes them towards invisibility.

Conclusion

What lies at the root of the multidimensional set of problems Europe is experiencing today is neoliberal policies which generate the conditions for the exclusion, marginalisation and victimisation of certain groups in society and produce austerity citizenship. Europe remains a political construct that favours the white middle class, while the working class and immigrants are excluded. It persists with an economic model that appeals to the stability concerns of a small number of capitalists at the expense of a faltering economy marked by deepening inequality and high unemployment. As long as this is the case, it is hard to see how the sense of belonging and trust in Europe can be restored.