

Werner Müller-Pelzer (ed.): Europe Renaissance. Essaying European Civil Society – Europa-Renaissance. Die europäische Bürgergesellschaft auf dem Prüfstand, Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2015, 274 pages. ISBN 978-3-7369-9032-6

Book Review by Werner Müller-Pelzer¹

Abstract: *The texts of the present volume represent the result of a conference held at Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts in 2014. With their contributions, researchers and students from different fields of investigation from several European countries invite the reader to focus on the perspective of European citizens to which less attention has been paid, compared to the institutional crisis of European Union. In contrast to its increased political and economic power, the EU has not succeeded in incorporating an authority able to communicate to its citizens the feeling of belonging together and to struggle for a common goal. In this sense the title “Europe Renaissance” is meant to push the search for a “good life” back to centre stage. From 2014 to 2016, the situation of the European Union has so clearly deteriorated that a well-known German expert in constitutional and public law Dieter Grimm comes to the result of an alarming democratic failure (Dieter Grimm, 2016, *Europa ja – aber welches? Zur Verfassung der europäischen Demokratie*, München: C.H. Beck). The political scientist Ulrike Guérot supports this analysis with a fresh manifesto (Ulrike Guérot, 2016, *Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss! Eine politische Utopie*, Bonn: Dietz).*

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The conference took place at the Business Faculty and was motivated by the idea to overcome the *absence* of Europe (also in the sense of absence of mind) in the curricula. Accordingly, the texts are meant to take up the preoccupation of business students with the future of Europe and not so much to be a contribution of specialists of modern Europe.

Taking in account this proviso, the contributions turn around the central preoccupations of European citizens:

- the search for a normative base of civil sense,
- the role of the nations in a united Europe,
- the rapprochement of different traditions of justice and constitutional order,

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- a reflection on the embedding of affective identities,
- the philosophical backbone of Europe and
- the questioning of the ideology of infinite growth.

Ten of twelve contributions are in English, two in German and one in French. The contributors are researchers as well as BA and MA students.

In his paper **“What is European Civil Society about?”**, the editor **Werner Müller-Pelzer** (Center of Intercultural and European Studies, Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts) gives a brief explanation of the terms “Renaissance” and “civil society”, both being connected with the legitimation problem that the European Union has to face. After a short review of the historical background, the author emphasizes the normative use of the term “civil society”, leading to the social embedding and the subjective concern which stand out as the two characteristics of a European civil attitude.

In his second essay, **“Jenseits der Wachstumsideologie. Europa kommt zur Besinnung”** (followed by a shorter English version, entitled „Beyond growthism: Europe comes to its senses”), Werner Müller-Pelzer chooses the fictitious perspective of two students who begin to discuss aspects of TTIP but quickly come to a critical judgment of the European Union as global player and the dogma of infinite economic growth. With reference to relevant literature, the students identify the intellectual and historical turning points which are responsible for the fatal influence of *growthism*. The contemporary anthropology which has overcome obsolete traditions allows them to put to good use the outlines of post-growth economy for their practice of responsible European citizens.

Gerd Held (researcher and journalist, Humboldt University Berlin) addresses in his contribution **“Die Sackgasse des ‚Immer enger vereint‘. Europa lebt vom Pluralismus nationaler Zivilgesellschaften”** the main question underlying the debate about the future of the European Union: Are the citizens able to follow, with an existential commitment, an always wider and deeper union or are there limits for finding themselves in an embedding identity? Or even: Has the EU yet transcended these limits? The bonding capacity of civil society, the author maintains, should not be confounded with the dispersal ability of a state or state-like organization. Therefore, he recommends a renewed interpretation of the nation beyond its current popular demonization. “For Europe, he asserts, the pluralism of responsible ‘civil nations’ is not replaceable by a unified European civil society.”

Peter Kruzlics (lawyer and researcher, Szeged University) examines the role of the “young” European law *vis-à-vis* the “old” national constitutional laws of European countries. In his contribution **“Valeurs constitutionnelles européennes: Les fondements juridiques de la construction d’une communauté politique”**, the author analyses with *finesse* how the exchange between national constitutional identities and European jurisprudence could contribute to the beginning of a European constitutional identity. The delegation of the (national) principle of sovereignty and the (European) exercise of subsidiarity are shown to be interdependent. The cooperation of both constitutional levels could be a prefiguration for the completion of normative expectations of national civil societies and a future European civil society.

Peter Kuzclics and **Marton Sulyok** (both lawyers and researchers, Szeged University) chose for their contribution the paper **“Constitutional cacophony, polyphony or symphony: Fine-tuning the constitutional framework for a European concert in a stronger harmony”** a suggestive musical metaphor. Having in mind the complex interplay of political, social and cultural integration, the authors induce us to understand the coexistence of different players as sources of constitutional thinking in Europe. The European Court of Justice (CJEU) has to consider the different nationally marked values and the jurisdiction of the respective constitutional courts. On the other hand the CJEU has to weigh them against comprehensive European values, especially those formulated in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The role of the *conductor* should stay vacant because the European *ensemble* has to start from an unspoken but fundamental cohesion; each member, nevertheless, being legitimated to tactfully remind the others in event of disharmonies. With the notion of a “fundamental identity” (as opposed to a momentary identity) there appears a term of constitutional intersection, which warrants closer attention.

In an original approach, **Mihály Bak**, **Lea Pitzini** and **Xhoana Dishnica** (MA students, Szeged University), analyse in **“Making the EU (more) flexible: Becoming ‘European’ without being a full member of the EU?”** the different layers of the term “European”. Seeing that there is not one compelling argument for justifying the title of being “European”, the authors come to the intellectually stimulating result that “membership is actually the least important criterion”. Instead, they prefer to speak of “Europeanization”, with it underlining that a specific bundle of arguments is decisive, the political will of belonging to Europe being a necessary but not sufficient criterion. On this foundation, the authors give an outlook on the present negotiations on TTIP indicating a “potential risk to the European identity and to the EU economic family”.

Hannah Kloppert and **Denise Baller** (BA students, Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts) address the educational situation in Europe. In their contribution **“The Reasons for Disenchantment of European Youth”** the authors try to find out why the considerable investments of the European Union in education couldn’t prevent the distancing, if not the indignation, of academic youth. One assertion is that the ordinary student does not differentiate between European and national education politics and financing. A second claim explores the unsubstantiated promise by the authorities to guarantee students an interesting and well paid job; the stagnant EU-economy, the banking crisis and the austerity politics in some member states thwarted this expectation. A third argument explores how the lack of a European civil spirit is not helping to counterbalance deceptions. Nevertheless, the authors describe a number of attractive educational offers that are mostly limited to technological excellence and economic growth.

In their text, **“Communitarian Method vs. Intergovernmentalism”**, **Mohamed Betbaieb** and **Anouk Gibelin** (BA students, Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts) give an insight into the present debate about good governance in the European Union. This debate has its origin in the unsatisfactory decision taking procedures which weaken public support in an already stressful state of affairs. Indeed, the EU institutions suffer from incoherence while the national governments augment this incoherence by

forcing the intergovernmental method instead of restoring the *méthode communautaire*. Its advantages are inner coherence, transparency and, above all, the search for a general interest. The alternative is well known: The economic and political weight prevails against arguments consolidated from common politics – a procedure which debilitates the European Parliament and the European Commission as well.

Daria Korobtseva (MA student, Kostroma University) in her short paper, **“Approach to Auto-stereotypes of Russians”**, focuses on the Russian mentality. The author shows the importance of peculiar historical experiences in Russia. The difficulty for outside spectators to accept the contradictory behaviour of Russians is a strong argument for restraint in dreaming of a comprehensive European civil society.

In his contribution **“How to become a European citizen?”**, **Werner Müller-Pelzer** (Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts) examines where the resources for a European citizenship may come from. By excluding state or state-like authorities as being derived structures, the author turns towards philosophical theories to lay the base for the development of citizenship. Here, Kant and Hegel represent the antipodes: Kant’s position argues for a strictly individualistic morality, whereas Hegel pleads for the concept of an original social wholeness. In this perspective, Hegel is closer to modern anthropological theories which emphasize the emergence of a moral and civil *sensus communis* from common situations rooted in a corporeal base. In this vein, instead of construing an abstract European civil society, it seems more plausible that Europeans should learn to become more sensitive to the value of common experiences in their daily life. The embeddedness of these experiences in a local, regional and national environment provides at the same time the guidance to cope with the threats of social autism.

Vlad Mureşan (philosopher and researcher, Cluj-Napoca University) in his paper, **“Hegel and Derrida on negativity”**, addresses the crucial question of how to speak about Europe in a philosophically positive way. Beyond a one-dimensional idea of technological progress, the driving force of dialectical evolution of society could give the impression of an irreducible negativity, devouring all achievements and blocking a positive European identity. That Europe is the byword for “otherness” is the thesis of Jacques Derrida: To prevent that Europe in its acting and interpreting would appropriate and submit the rest of the world, Europe as non-identity should accept and absorb the otherness of the world. Against this dissolution of European identity the author pleads for the positive ideal of universal conciliation he finds in Hegel: instead of fusing with the Others – a process in which the antagonism of mutual recognition would come to a standstill – the concrete struggle of standpoints and their overcoming would result to be an enrichment recognizing the part of universality that is deposited in the Other.

Thomas Brysch (researcher, Viana do Castelo Politechnic University) asks: **“How can Kant’s Philosophy contribute to a Renaissance of European Thought?”** The author argues that Kant’s critique of the scientific knowledge of his time remains a paradigm of occidental thinking reminding us that Science as the knowledge of Nature is not just the technical domination of the world; it would be a disaster to keep suggesting nowadays that in principle Science will overcome all our problems and answer the last questions. Kant showed that Science, by its methodological arrangements, creates a distance towards

the phenomena, and this filter alienates them from ordinary experience. Science, then, operates a transformation of phenomena and additionally establishes a restriction on the field of investigation. Both arrangements mean a restriction of findings and, thus, the impossibility of a total knowledge, or a scientific *Weltanschauung*. In opposition to Descartes and Hume, Kant does not intend to become an engineer: his objects are mind-objects as for modern physicians. Accordingly, scientists who are overstepping their area may become dangerous; by interfering in nature they are unable to predict all the consequences. Nevertheless, with a critical enclosure of Science, society is provided with a powerful tool for mastering life.

Different in scope, discipline and size, the contributions provide the foundation for advanced students who are searching for a motivating perspective. In fact, most universities seem more involved in the global run for reputation and money than to deal with their task of educating the Europeans of tomorrow.