Verfassungsblog
ON MATTERS CONSTITUTIONAL

The End of the Eurocrats' Dream

Richard Bellamy

22.11.2016 doi: 10.17176/20161123-143525

The premise of this timely and important book is that the Euro crisis has placed the EU in an existential predicament that cannot be resolved in the usual fashion of yet more of the same. Though there is surprisingly little by way of a sketch of what might have been the Eurocrats' dream, the reader is left in no doubt that we are currently living through what might best be termed the Eurocrats' nightmare – a form of governance that falls far short of the current challenges confronting the EU, and is indeed partly promotive of them.

What then is (or was) the noble dream, and what is the nightmare into which we have descended. Broadly speaking, the dream was that of Jean Monnet as later theorised and defended by functionalists such as Ernest Haas, whereby cooperation and integration through technocratic governance in crucial economic areas, starting with coal and steel – the resources essential for waging war, would gradually spill over into ever more areas, securing peace and promoting prosperity along the way, with popular support for a more unified Europe following in its wake. This was the functional argument for integration by stealth, supported by a 'permissive consensus'. As the editors remark, its justification lay in the dual claims that 'scaling up' and technocratic rule at a distance offered appropriate ways to manage the negative externalities and provide for certain global common goods associated with the increasing interdependence of states, whilst at the same time offering a more impartial perspective, insulated from domestic electoral pressures, that could help overcome rent seeking by national and sectoral groups.

Although there can be real advantages to this approach, as Maurizio Ferrera notes in his comment with regard to the improvements in public finances, the modernization of the state apparatus and the rebalancing of certain distributional distortions in welfare policy and the labour market in Italy during the 1990s, it also has serious disadvantages. Administrative centralisation and relative insulation from negative feedback from those affected by poor policies, can lead to imperfect knowledge and inefficiencies, especially with regard to the peculiarities of local circumstances within as highly heterogeneous a polity as the EU. The EU's dependence on governance and law rather than government and administration tends to magnify these problems, especially when the adoption of common rules and regulations requires unanimity amongst those responsible for implementing them. The result is likely to be suboptimal, one size fits all, policies that prove hard to adapt and change. There is also a bias towards negative over positive integration, the dismantling of barriers to competition and trade rather than the establishment of market correcting or compensating measures.

So long as the EU operated in areas of low electoral salience, concentrating on regulatory rather than overtly redistributional issues, and offered Pareto improvements to all the member states, then these drawbacks were less in evidence. As the editors and contributors note, the euro crisis has turned the Eurocrats dream to a nightmare. Stuck with the same policy tools but forced to tackle issues that are redistributive and win-lose with regulatory instruments ill-suited to addressing the multiple causes of the crisis or the local differences and varieties of capitalism of the Eurozone, the 'permissive consensus' has given way to an ever more vocal 'constraining dissensus' from the losers of European integration, and of the global processes which it is seen as accelerating rather than taming. The great strength of the book lies in the path breaking and detailed way in which this nightmare gets depicted in all its dimensions – economic, legal and political.

The volume is certainly meant as a wake up call – most contributors agree that at present the EU risks sleep walking to disaster. While earlier crises were viewed as opportunities for further and deeper integration, most regard that as unlikely – at least for the foreseeable future. Rather, as Jonathan White notes, emergency powers have been used to yet further empower the very dysfunctional Eurocratic methods criticised by the authors. These policies now threaten to provoke a popular backlash within the member states that places the EU itself in jeopardy. Not just in Brexit Britain and Trump's USA, but also across Europe regulatory neo-liberalism has aroused an increasingly vocal opposition from the losers of globalisation who have embraced nationalist populism.

What the authors believe should or could be done once the Eurocrats have awoken is harder to say. The editors note Dani Rodrik's trilemma, in which he asserts the impossibility of simultaneously pursuing economic globalisation, democratic politics and national self-determination. Yet, they reject as equally dreamlike the response offered by the Eurodemocrats to build a pan- or trans-European democracy, though not all the commentators completely concur. It might be tempting to believe that nationalist populism could be constrained and even overcome by scaling-up democracy to the supranational level. However, they agree with Fritz Scharpf's critique of Habermas's advocacy of this solution as not only politically impossible in the current context of widespread popular antagonism to the EU, but also as normatively undesirable given the extent to which democratic processes are already embedded in the diverse constitutional democracies of the member states, in which historic struggles have shaped distinctive social and political settlements. Rightly in my view, they regard the disembedding of hard won political and social rights from these contexts as likely to lead to their evisceration, however well-motivated such a democratic scaling-up might be. Yet, they are not in any sense Eurosceptics – they reject a return to a Westphalian system of states and acknowledge the importance of something like the EU to the very possibility for the mutual regulation of the inevitable interactions between states and individuals in an interconnected world. The challenge is to do so in a way that is wide-awake to current political and economic realities, not least in rendering EU decision-makers more responsive to the heterogeneous character of Europe and the demands of its citizens, especially in allowing states to secure them some social protection. Cue for a follow-up volume I think, a process to which the commentaries, expertly edited by Julia Slupska, Research Assistant at the LSE, mark a welcome first step.

Damian Chalmers, Markus Jachtenfuchs, Christian Joerges (Ed.): The End of the Eurocrats' Dream, CUP 2016

Table of Contents:

1. The retransformation of Europe, D. Chalmers, M. Jachtenfuchs and C. Joerges

2. The costs of non-disintegration: the case of the European Monetary Union, F. Scharpf

3. Sharing the Eurocrat's dream: a democratic approach to EMU governance in the post-crisis era, K. Nicolaïdis and M. Watson

4. Neumark vindicated: the three patterns of Europeanisation of national tax systems and the future of the Social and Democratic Rechtsstaat, A. Menéndez

5. What Europe does to citizenship, C. Colliot-Thélène

6. Silencing the Eurocrats in public crisis politics, P. de Wilde

7. Conflict-minimizing integration: how the EU achieves massive integration despite massive protest, P. Genschel and M. Jachtenfuchs

8. An unholy trinity of EU presidents? The political accountability of post-crisis EU executive power, M. Bovens and D. Curtin

9. The limits of collective action and collective leadership, G. Majone

10. Europe's legitimacy problem and the courts, D. Grimm

11. Crisis reconfiguration of the European constitutional state, D. Chalmers

12. Integration through law and the crisis of law in Europe's emergency, C. Joerges.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Bellamy

Richard Bellamy is the Director of the Max Weber Programme at the European University Institute. He took up the Directorship on the 1st of May 2014, on exceptional leave from his position as Professor of Political Science at University College, London (UCL).

SUGGESTED CITATION

Bellamy, Richard: The End of the Eurocrats' Dream, Verfassungsblog, 22.11.2016, doi: 10.17176/20161123-143525.

Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20161123-143525.