

A New Narrative for an Old Project: Re-Imagining Europe

by Giovanni Santambrogio

Considering that I was born on 30 May 1993, and the Maastricht Treaty entered into force when I was just six months old, Europe appears normal to me.

Not only has Europe come to represent the highest embodiment of my personal hopes, rights and ambitions, but the very notion of a European Union is to me a symbol of normalcy.

I have become used to the privileges that European citizens take for granted. I consider peace a given fact, as I have never known war. I take food for granted, as I have never gone hungry. I perceive democracy as integral to my daily existence, as I have never experienced totalitarianism and one-man rule.

Peace and prosperity are of course not unique to the European Union and its member states. Yet, there is no other

region or geographical space in which such a large number of states have achieved, with the due variations, our widespread standards of prosperity, peace, democratic stability and social justice.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore Europe's present predicaments. Still reeling from the economic crisis, the Union is also grappling with a political crisis of equal magnitude and gravity.

Perceived by many as a technocracy, the European Union suffers from a severe problem of branding. It is often portrayed as a soulless bureaucratic machine motivated by the sole goal of survival and perpetuation. It should not surprise many, therefore, if strongly Eurosceptic political parties and movements have risen to power in certain member states, including Italy.

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Actually, what is surprising is that this did not happen before.

Many have come to consider the economic crisis – which, is worth remembering, did not originate in Europe – as the primary cause for the political crisis the Union, and Eurozone countries in particular, now face.

I personally disagree. There have been clear signs of a political crisis brewing in the EU well before the US sub-prime mortgage collapse. The rejection of a European Constitution in 2005 by French and Dutch citizens should have been a clear wake-up call: Europe and Europeans were growing more distant and apart well before 2008. Europe needed a rethinking of its governance models and political mandate, even its very *raison d'être*.

The EU has undoubtedly made several important mistakes in seeking to address the financial crisis. In hindsight, it is clear that austerity has not provided the desired results, and may have even contributed to make matters worse. In a nutshell, one of the biggest mistakes was that of administering the same cure to patients that not only were suffering from different symptoms but were also at different stages of the contagion cycle.

We should not consider these mistakes as merely methodological. Instead, I believe the biggest mistake was conceptual, in the very definition and therefore interpretation of the crisis.

The EU consistently chose to prioritize the economic dimension of the crisis, ignoring its political and governance

roots. On the one hand, this was deemed necessary to safeguard the common currency, ensure its stability and limit contagion effects. On the other, diminishing Eurozone debt, particularly for such member states as Greece and Italy, was understood as crucial to these same goals.

When considered in this light, it should come as no surprise that European leaders came to define the crisis in purely financial terms. Unfortunately, such a reaction has only exacerbated the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic movements, motivated by a growing sense of distance and even disdain towards the so-called Brussels “Eurocracy”. This may also help to explain why it is today commonly believed that the economic crisis preceded and contributed to the EU’s political crisis.

One can then see how an error of interpretation of the former has contributed to a misjudgement of the latter. The two crises were and still are treated sequentially: in order to solve the political crisis, we must first address the economic one. Once again, this shows the conceptual misunderstanding that economic difficulties have led to a political crisis, when in actuality such economic troubles only exacerbated a deeper, pre-existing governance and legitimacy crisis facing the Union.

Indeed, one may turn this causal link on its head, and argue the opposite. The Union’s shortcomings in aligning its political authority to the broadening of its economic power – above all, failing to equip the European Central Bank with adequate crisis management

instruments – has hindered Europe's ability to resolve the financial crisis. One may look to the United States and the Federal Reserve for hints at how a different response could have materialized had the European experiment advanced beyond its initial stages.

All of the above begs the question: what could have been done differently and what can be done today?

It is perhaps ironic that one of the biggest problems facing the Union is directly connected to its greatest achievement. In the mind of Spinelli and Rossi first and of Monnet, Schumann, Adenauer, De Gasperi and others later, European integration was essentially a project of peace and, to a lesser extent, of prosperity. In some ways, the awarding of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union represented the culmination of *this* European project.

At the same time, this event, this culmination should also have been perceived as a warning. Once a project is understood as having achieved its foundational goals, it ceases to exist and is overcome, unless it is able to reinvent itself and find new meaning and purpose.

This, in many respects, is where the Union went wrong: it failed to articulate a new *raison d'être* as its previous one gradually faded away. It was incapable of adapting to global shifts and changes and failed to develop a new, forward looking and comprehensive narrative to justify its continued existence while articulating the communal benefits of

continued European integration.

At the height of the crisis, citizens were repeatedly told that the crisis had to be resolved and the Euro saved, or else. For years we were told *what* to do, but never *why* we should do it: basically, this is an example of tactics without strategy. Meanwhile, nationalist and populist movements have filled the strategic vacuum, promoting simplistic, parochial and unrealistic answers that have done much to enhance their appeal and electoral strength.

What Europe needs is a new ideal, a mission, something capable of inspiring and winning the "hearts and minds" of its citizens. The EU needs to shake itself out of its slumber, rise up and speak its mind, acting as a protector and promoter, both internally and externally, of a certain kind of democracy. One rooted in the enlightenment, and therefore carrying inherently European traits, and centred on the notions of participation, social justice, a fair distribution of wealth and the rule of law.

In my opinion, such a model of democracy should be constructed and articulated around six key principles: (i) defence of peace; (ii) non-aggression in international affairs; (iii) social justice; (iv) civil rights promotion; (v) equality in development and sustainable growth; (vi) participation, meaning also non-exclusion and respect of diversity.

I am keenly aware that the present political climate in Europe may not be conducive to such ambitious proposals. Nevertheless, one positive element to emerge from Europe's current

inability to handle migratory flows is that it has clearly underlined the political dimension of these challenges. Migration, like security and climate change, can only be addressed through a long-term strategy that necessitates clear political will and compromises among member states.

Clearly, this will be an uphill battle, and it will not be easy to convince citizens and leaders who have today grown accustomed to blaming the EU for many of their daily problems.

But then again, complex problems call for complex solutions.

Much time has already been lost. We must begin (re)building a new communal narrative, goal and ambition for the European project. One capable of inspiring new generations of citizens to carry forth the struggle, re-imagining Europe and its ideals and continue down the path of integration.

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