Review - The Crisis of the European Union

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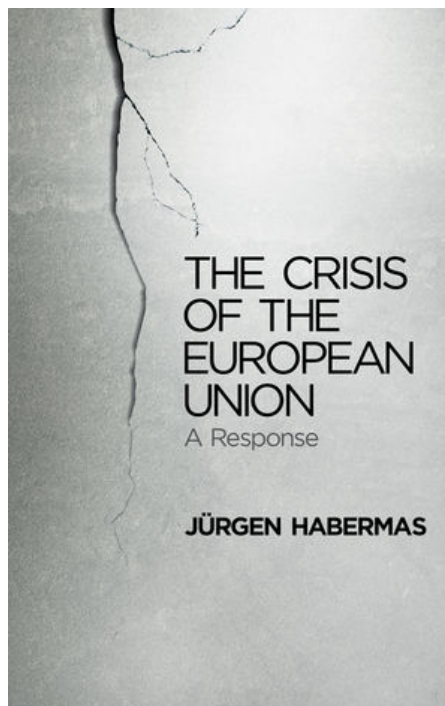
JEREMY GARLICK, MAR 22 2013

The Crisis of the European Union: A Response
By: Jürgen Habermas
Cambridge: Polity, 2012
(translated from the German by Ciaran Cronin, German edition published 2011)

The most recent volume by the German political philosopher Jürgen Habermas consists chiefly of a major new 70-page essay which offers an analysis of the crisis facing the European Union and an attempt to reconfigure it theoretically and practically. This is supplemented by three previously published articles (the first of which is in the main part of the book, while the other two are in the appendix) on human rights, the economy and "the significance of a reversal in European policy executed on the quiet" (p. 102), as well as an explicatory interview with Thomas Assheuer of the German daily newspaper Die Welt entitled 'After the bankruptcy'. Given the European Union's recent struggles to overcome its debt crisis, as well as other well-documented problems such as the so-called 'democratic deficit' and the stalled debate about the EU constitution, the provocatively-titled latest work by the éminence grise of Europeanisation demands to be given a close reading.

What is presented stems from a combination of Habermas' growing realisation that the EU project may fail and his contrarian faith that the Kantian project of attaining European prosperity and, eventually, world peace by establishing democratic liberal institutions of supranational governance can, despite the increasing accumulation of obstacles, still be achieved. The Crisis of the European Union: A Response therefore sits, as do the majority of his other works,

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within the progressive exposition of his political and moral philosophy, but at the same time provides some fresh insight into his interpretation of real world developments. It also represents a renewal of the themes of his (1975) work Legitimation Crisis, in which he analysed the structural weaknesses inherent in constructing a 'lifeworld' (lebenswelt, a term which refers to people's shared social experiences and practices) based on free market capitalist economics on the one hand and democratic politics on the other.

In the 1970s Habermas perceived an inbuilt contradiction between the increasing monopolisation of sociocultural values by corporate consumerism and the normative project of emancipating the peoples of Europe (and the world) through democratised institutions of supranational government. The 'legitimation crisis' of the aforementioned 1975 work has transformed into 'the crisis of the European Union' in the 2012 work, but despite the title it is clear from the contents (particularly Part III of the main essay) that Habermas intends the emancipatory project begun in Europe to be extended to the rest of the world as well. The use of the same word in the titles of both works is not coincidental, even if the connection between the two books is not made explicit. In Habermas' view, the crisis is one that arises inevitably from an ineluctable conflict between democracy and capitalism, and normatively the only way to overcome it is for those in power, instead of machinating "behind closed doors" (p. 102), to hand the European project over to those it was originally intended to emancipate, the people of Europe. This, according to the author, should lead to "the democratic success of a noisy, broad-based social movement" (p. 102).

The interview with Die Welt that makes up the first part of the appendix is, in terms of understanding Habermas' views on the present crisis in the EU, probably the best place to start. Habermas' writing can be difficult to penetrate for the newcomer due to the use of innovative technical terms throughout his oeuvre (e.g. 'systematically distorted communication', 'lifeworld', and so on), and his works often become clearer only after multiple readings. Since the interview consists of a transcribed conversation, the language is considerably more accessible than that of the first one hundred pages. The interviewer also does not hesitate to ask for clarification on what he sees as the 'utopianism' of Habermas' belief in the Kantian project of perpetual peace through world government by supranational institutions such as the United Nations. This criticism is one that, for scholars of IR, contains distant but distinct echoes of E.H. Carr's deconstruction of the failure of the inter-war League of Nations in his (1939) The Twenty Years' Crisis. Thus, this interview can be read as a very stimulating contemporary reformulation of the realist-idealist debate of an earlier era, and one that, it goes without saying, has considerable relevance to the unfolding events of our own day.

Of the two essays that precede the appendix, the first, a newly published text entitled 'The Crisis of the European Union in Light of a Constitutionalization of International Law – An Essay on the Constitution for Europe', consists of three parts. Part I, entitled 'Why Europe is now more than ever a constitutional project', sets the stage for Habermas' exposition of the reasoning behind his claim that the attempt to establish a supranational system of governance based on a working EU constitution must not be abandoned. Part II, 'The European Union must decide between transnational democracy and post-democratic executive federalism', elaborates on this theme by discussing the need for the goals of the project of European political union, which Habermas understandably sees as paralysed at the present time, to be pursued with renewed vigour. The aim is to achieve a supranational system of governance in the EU states while retaining national governments to administer the execution of policy. Part III, 'From the international to the cosmopolitan community', extends the thesis out into the world beyond the EU, arguing that a system of democratically elected world government is needed in addition to the activities of the UN, which should restrict itself, Habermas believes, to the areas of "human rights and the prohibition of violence" (p. 64).

Habermas' normative stance, it can be readily seen, remains as ambitious, even idealistic, as ever, as the author himself admits. Yet, given that he confesses that in 2010 "the realization hit home to me for the first time that the failure of the European project was a real possibility" (p. 102), the attempt to push an agenda of proposed world governance along Kantian lines seems premature to say the least. If the EU is in crisis and the UN and its offshoots largely toothless in the face of American intransigence, what is the chance for the foreseeable future of extending out from these insufficiently democratic semi-failures to an elected global government?

In fact, the ghost of Kant and the long concluded 'first great debate' of IR (between realism and idealism) loom large over these pages. There are references to the sage of Königsberg everywhere in the text. Perpetual peace among nations and the establishment of universal human rights based on the categorical imperative are, it seems, dreams

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still worth pursuing. Habermas apparently expects more of Europeans than merely saving Europe; he expects them to save the world.

Herein, despite the keen critical understanding of the problems facing the EU, lies the central problem of the book. Although Habermas' pessimism concerning the European project is well-founded, his normative agendas of promoting world government and universal human rights fly in the face of reality. In talking of Europe and then moving seamlessly on to talk of the world, Habermas appears not to recognise that the world consists of more than Europe. Where, for instance, are China? Russia? India? Asia? Africa? South America? This is a book that is so deeply rooted in Europe that it appears to take it for granted that the world is destined to follow Europe's lead forever. Unfortunately Habermas never asks himself the question: who would follow a pied piper who cannot even play his own flute? If the European project is on the brink of failure, what is the sense of discussing anything beyond the saving or dismemberment of the EU? In the parts of the book dealing with cosmopolitanism and human dignity Habermas seems to have left reality behind him and soared into the realm of pure Kantian metaphysics and Wilsonian idealism. His faith in the power of properly-constructed democratic institutions to transform the future of humanity is, as his interviewer Assheuer points out, indeed utopian. And at this point the historically grounded Frankfurt School critical theory from which Habermas once emerged seems but a distant memory.

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