

# 'Different perception of Europe in a time of crisis Europe as an opportunity / Europe as a risk'

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The current crisis or set of crises in Europe present the EU with challenges that contain within them opportunities for political growth in a direction that has long been considered desirable in Europe without ever attaining the degree of importance that they deserve.

If the crisis shows us nothing else, it shows us how deeply and completely globalization has penetrated the lives of Europeans. Whether we like it or not what happens in Greece, Portugal and Ireland happens to us in one way or another wherever we happen to be in Europe. We are all in the same leaky boat as the saying goes – and the boat has to be repaired at sea. In the course of the current year not just the ministers, financial experts, bankers etc. but everybody will become painfully aware of what the last three years of crisis cost as taxes rise and government services shrink. As the material security of the man-in-the-street wobbles, so does his psychological security as well. Out of a material crisis a moral and political one can easily emerge, one which challenges established social identities and possibly even decimates fledgling political identities like the European identity such as it is. Such a crisis brings enormous material risks with it, risks with which everybody is all too familiar. Since we have no choice in the matter the only genuine option is to make a virtue of necessity and seek the opportunities that lurk in the crisis: where the devil is; the Good Lord is never far away. Thus the most arguably humane journalist of the “Financial Times” Harry Ayers, writes, “what Occupy is doing primarily is opening up a space – which you might call the space of deliberative democracy – as a necessary counterpoint to the often over-managed and media-controlled routines of official politics.” That applies to politics at all levels and thus is a reminder for European politicians to seize the opportunity that the crisis presents and fill that space with substance that is readily recognizable as such. The answer to our crisis is “more Europe” as José Manuel Barroso frequently insists but the real question is more of which aspects of Europe?

The enormous success that Europe has been in the last sixty plus years: peace based upon growing prosperity, ever closer co-operation in the economic sphere that brings with the will to ever closer union amongst the participating national states, led us to the steadfast assumption of linear growth and integration. To be sure there was a certain sense of unease with respect to popular discontent with what was taken to be increasing distance between European institutions and a popular sense of powerlessness in the face of a mighty megalith, which has expressed itself as increasing lethargy concerning participation in European elections on the one hand and the increasing pull away from the traditional center to political extremism.

In short, Europe's successes in the last half century have been increasingly bound up with the "democracy deficit" that clearly was an essential element in the French and Dutch rejection of the constitution and the initial Irish "no" to the Lisbon Treaty. The situation seemed serious but not desperate. The crisis has transformed these serious matters into urgent, perhaps desperate, ones but it has at the same time brought the shape of measures that would allow us to cope with them into focus. It has made clear what policy has to accomplish but we remain less than clear about how democratic politics gets there. We are uncomfortable with our own justice and solidarity and that in itself is an index of a political problem behind the problem as it were. In short, the opportunities that the present crisis presents are as real as its risks are dangerous. It will take courage to seize them

The threat that the European project of completing the single market could stall or draw to an outright halt as a land like Greece is forced to withdraw from the Euro is so mind-boggling as to make many people for whom closer political union was little less than a nightmare completely rethink their views. Gradually the idea that that common project cannot simply be a technocratic matter of economics and finance has forced us to recognize that implementing justice and solidarity is first and foremost a matter of political action. The previously 'unthinkable' alternative of stagnation, possibly even dissolution, of the Union has determined that it is necessary to sacrifice at least some national priorities in order to preserve the Union and its financial structure. But it aöll somehow goes beyond economics and finance. This realization is an opportunity that has to be seized as the point of departure for a profound re-thinking of the spirit of European politics – something that seemed superfluous until not very long ago. That means little less than re-examining the core political values upon which Europe was founded and re-interpreting them in the light of today's uncomfortable realities. Federalism and subsidiarity are perhaps the two most important cases in point. In much recent discussion they have tended to be inflexibly and inexorably opposed to one another in a way that Founding Fathers as different as Robert Schuman and Altiero Spinelli would scarcely have understood. The crisis that we are now experiencing provides abundant evidence that Europe's survival depends upon understanding these principles dynamically and constructively rather than merely in a polemic fashion. At the end of the day, the challenge of holding Europe together ultimately involves reflecting upon the common good that the European project implicitly entails as well as the search for the means to its political realization. This may seem a long way from "everyday politics" but "everyday politics" tacitly presupposes just such an end. The present crisis is therefore an opportunity to begin a discussion about principles of justice and solidarity – and many other significantly related political matters -- in Europe that is long overdue.

A further political challenge that the crisis has brought with it which can be considered a potential opportunity is the absolutely crucial matter of consensus-building and that at two levels: consensus between nations and consensus within nations. They are intimately related to one another. Effective European policy

has to emerge from that “space of deliberative democracy” that Harry Ayers rightly contrasts with “the often over-managed and media-controlled routines of official politics.” With that sort of consensus behind it governments can be in a position to take truly bold steps to assist another in times of travail. Robert Schuman was convinced that Europe could only be built on a foundation of generosity. If there is truth in that contention— as there must be, if consensus over broad disagreement can be reached -- then it is profound truth and, for the most part, a value profoundly missing in European public life at all levels at the moment. However, generosity between nations can itself only be rooted in public consensus, i.e. in the collective conviction that is right and proper to be generous. Here is another opportunity in the form of a challenge to Europe. So the current crisis or series of crises challenges European politicians to rise to the task that an enormous multifaceted work of persuasion analogous to the one that confronted the champions of the U.S. Constitution and incorporated into the most important American contribution to the project of The Enlightenment, “The Federalist Papers”. It has essentially to do with much needed political renewal on a massive scale and the first step to Europe should be a cultural community in the highest sense of the term as Robert Schuman insisted it should be.

The pressing need to act together for the sake of Europe for the sake of our respective nations and for our own sake is no less an opportunity than it is a threat. Europe can only be as good as we make it.