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A "pause for thought" without the thought?

Possible ways to talk about the future of the EU today

After the rejection of the EU constitution in the French and Dutch referenda, Europe's elites launched a one-year "pause for thought" in the ratification process. A summit in June 2006 brought an extension of the adjournment. The time could be put to good use, writes political scientist Jan-Werner Müller. Theoretically speaking, there are three Euro-visions currently competing; a discussion of their pros and cons would be well worth Europeans' while.

Already in 2005, Luxembourg's Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker commented on the official pause for thought that the EU had declared after the French and Dutch voters' no to the constitution: "I see the pause but I don't see much thinking." Little has changed to this day. In mid-2006, Europe's political leaders extended the adjournment for another year, but they have not offered new fundamental visions to European citizens — though Juncker had complained, with a pathos not uncommon in EU-related rhetoric, that citizens no longer "loved" their Union, and that the EU no longer made them "dream". At the same time, European elites seem reluctant to commit to a deliberately visionless pragmatism, which in theory would be one option for moving forward. So how is one to imagine the "new foundation" of Europe to which Angela Merkel referred in her very first address devoted to Europe in the German *Bundestag*?

Does the apparent "thoughtlessness" of the pause also have to do with the fact that academic discussions about concepts of Europe have reached a dead end — and therefore are unable to provide either citizens or politicians with new "food for thought"? Not necessarily. Theoretically, there are three competing basic visions for the EU, fragments of which sometimes even filter into political debates — without always forming a consistent whole. Hence it would be worthwhile for Europeans to debate some of the pros and cons of these visions.

First, one can still find the odd advocate of the Union as a future "state of nation-states". These advocates, often somewhat imprecisely described as "federalists", have always considered the constitution as an essential step towards a European federal state. Such a federal state can be justified in a number of ways: on a consciously ethical basis, with the argument that the moral substance of the classical nation-state has been profoundly compromised by its belligerent past; or as a practical preventive measure, to keep conflict-prone nation-states in check.

But an EU-state can also be justified from a completely different, in some ways even opposing perspective. For example, British political scientist Glyn

Morgan has tried to show, in a much-debated book on *The Idea of a European Superstate*, that a robust concept of pan-European security also requires a pan-European state: according to Morgan, it is simply irresponsible for European elites to rest assured in a position of permanent strategic dependency on the US.¹ And then there is of course always the argument that only a strong EU can rescue the "European social model".

In recent years it has become clear that in virtually all European countries there are simply no majorities that would favour a European federal state; the debate over the constitution — contrary to the intentions of many Europhiles — made this abundantly clear. This scepticism understandably has grown out of the fact that many federalist arguments appear rather dubious upon closer inspection: for example, there is no single European social model. The differences between, for example, the Scandinavian countries, the Mediterranean states, and the "liberal Atlantic countries" such as Ireland and Great Britain are generally far more profound than the differences between Europe as a whole and the US.

On the other hand, in recent years a vision of Europe that one might call "supranational multiculturalism" has established itself as a conscious alternative to the dream of the federal state. This perspective seeks a Union whose task primarily consists in recognizing — and preserving — diversity and difference. Instead of striving to be a classical, homogenous state, such a Europe would strive to be a kind of "people of Others", to cite the influential legal scholar Joseph Weiler. Here, tolerance becomes a prime European virtue; the Union's character as an entity with federal law but without a federal state is not seen as a weakness, but rather a part of a pan-European moral "re-education" or even self-emancipation from Europeans' pervious nationalist selves. According to Weiler, Europeans are invited to obey the EU; no one can force them, because the EU as such cannot coerce its citizens. But to obey laws issued "in the name of the peoples of Europe" becomes a means to continuously keep the "inner nationalist" in check and to practice tolerance. Like supporters of the European federal state, proponents of this vision ultimately see Europe as a tool for moral education — only not quite so obviously.

It is worth emphasizing that under no circumstances do the proponents of this kind of supranational multiculturalism want a Union conceived as a federal democracy. Rather, they imagine a so-called "demoi-cracy" as the power not of one people or of one "demos" but rather of peoples — or "demoi" — who consciously affirm, and wish to retain, their diversity. There is much that appears attractive in this vision. But one wonders just how credible European leaders are when they promote this kind of supranational multiculturalism while at the domestic level emphatically renouncing the supposed illusions of naive "multiculturalism" — as has become the standard political rhetoric by now in almost all countries. Can one arbitrarily limit the principle of mutual recognition to certain policy sectors or levels?

The question arises whether noble talk of a "European struggle for recognition" merely disguises the fact that "recognition" mainly involves acknowledgment of entirely prosaic national regulations and norms? The French would no doubt have acknowledged the now proverbial "Polish plumber" in all his cultural distinctiveness — as long as he stayed at home and did not try to fix *bidets* in Paris. That is primarily why the rhetoric of tolerance, or of Europe as a journey and as "forever becoming", sounds so false when it comes from the mouths of European elites. Even before the referendum in 2005, Dominique de Villepin

and Jorge Semprún wrote that the essence of Europe could be described as a "travelling dream", *un rêve qui voyage*, in their book about "the Europeans" [*L'Homme Européen*].² Even to those who do not consider Europe a neoliberal, job-destroying bureaucratic machine, such jewelled phrases must sound like mockery.

The main model for a supranational, multicultural Europe is Canada — even if its proponents do not always put it that way. Canada is the only country that is simultaneously a country of immigration, a multinational political patchwork, and a state whose constitution includes the principle of multiculturalism. From an implicitly Canadian perspective, then, the preliminary failure of the constitutional treaty is not a tragedy; Canadians have been trying in vain for more than two decades to reach a constitutional "accord". More important than the result is that the process — or conversation, as it is often called — is kept going; it raises the possibility of drawing in new voices, of deepening and broadening the conversation. No wonder Canadians refer to the endless constitutional conversation that "we are" — as if the country had become a nation of Gadamerians.

The third vision of Europe is in fact not a vision but a justification of the existing Brussels bureaucracy, which harkens back to Helmut Schmidt's famous comment that anyone who has visions should go to a doctor. From this technocratic perspective, Brussels today carries out functions similar to those that nation-states delegate to non-elected institutions — central banks are the classic example (although for many proponents of the technocratic perspective, the European Central Bank has in fact gone too far in the direction of independence: not even the German federal bank had so much room for manoeuvre).

On the other hand, insist the technocrats, the policy areas most important to citizens remain under the control of member states — above all social welfare and education. Thus, from this perspective, Brussels is not a government in the making but rather a cluster of regulatory agencies — and often to the advantage of European consumers, who, for example, will soon no longer have to pay exorbitant mobile phone roaming fees. These agencies are in turn part of a system of national and supranational checks and balances that can block any potential despotic tendencies in Brussels. Thus, for the technocrats, complaints about the Union's supposed democratic deficit are at best relegated to inconsequential debates in the cultural pages, and at worst case kept alive artificially by wannabe-Madisons so that money for research on "European democracy" continues to pour out of Brussels.

There are good reasons to debate these three visions of Europe — surely none of them is entirely mistaken about the reality of the European Union today or what it might be in the future. The federal state is a distant vision but remains a goal in political speeches, as if a different end-state were absolutely unthinkable; for their part, technocrats feel confirmed with each passing day in their belief that the supposed crisis of legitimacy is in fact a "non-crisis", since the EU obviously keeps on going and functioning. Meanwhile, demoi-crats are winning more supporters in academia — not least perhaps because they tend to justify the status quo normatively while leaving open almost all options for the future.

But it is also clear that the debate about Europe's future must go beyond the crude question of "How much Europe do we want?" First, clear criteria must be specified by which to measure the various Euro-visions — though not all

criteria are compatible or even commensurable. In that respect, those who wish to use the pause in order to contemplate the various possible ways forward must necessarily engage with much more profound questions: can consensus be reached, or a majority be won, for a pan-European understanding of what politics should be about in the first place? If the answer is no, then perhaps the principled commitment to pragmatism and to the Union as a kind of commonwealth is presently the most honest alternative to grandiloquent visions. The classic shark, or bicycle, argument — that the EU must remain in motion in order not to die or keel over, and therefore always needs a next big thing or project on the horizon — is empirically unsustainable: the pause may be frustrating for Federalists, but it also shows that a EU on hold need not expire. The Brussels elites will most probably not acknowledge this fact at first; their rhetoric continues to veer between a doomsday scenario and the kind of Euro-PR that was common well before the referenda, and which, before anything else, always asks how Europe can best "sell itself".

¹ Glyn Morgan, *The Idea of a European Superstate* (Princeton, 2005)

² Dominique de Villepin and Jorge Semprún, *L'Homme Européen* (Paris, 2005)

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