Cooperate or bust

The existential crisis of the European Union

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The critique that Europe lacks representative legitimacy may well be correct, argues Ulrich Beck, but not when based on the principle of "no nation, no democracy". Cosmopolitanization demands post-national approaches to democratic accountability in Europe.

When a world-order collapses, then the analysis of it starts. Though that doesn’t seem to go for the type of social theory currently prevalent, which with universalist aloofness and somnambulant certainty levitates above the low-ground of epochal change: global warming, financial crisis, the crisis of democracy and national institutions. Today this kind of universalist social analysis, be it structuralist, interactionist, Marxist, critical- or systems-theoretical, is antiquated and provincial. Antiquated because it excludes what is patent: a paradigm shift in modern society and politics. Provincial because it falsely absolutizes the path-dependent scope of experience and expectation in western European and American modernization, thus distorting the sociological view of its particularity.

It would be an understatement to say that European sociology needs to understand the modernization of other societies for supplementary reasons, in order to complete its world-view. More the case is that we Europeans can understand ourselves only if we "deprovincialize" – in other words, if sociologically and methodologically we learn to see through the eyes of others. This is what I call the cosmopolitan turn in sociological and political theory and research.

The paradigmatic case I would like to use to explain this cosmopolitan turn is the existential crisis of the European Union in the era of cosmopolitanization.

I will introduce the argument in four stages. First: What does “cosmopolitanization” – as opposed to “cosmopolitanism” mean? Why is it so essential that the social sciences discuss “cosmopolitanization” (and not “globalization”)? Second: how far is a new perspective on the current European crisis opened up by the cosmopolitan turn and the facts of cosmopolitanization? Third: What are the methodological consequences that can be inferred? What does cosmopolitanization mean in terms of sociological research? How can the currently predominant “methodological nationalism” be replaced by
“methodological cosmopolitanism”? Fourth: what political consequences can be adduced? Finally, I will briefly point to five delusions of national politics and attempt to identify their consequences for a solution to the crisis of the European Union.

First: What is meant by “cosmopolitanization”?

We are living in an era not of cosmopolitanism but of cosmopolitanization: the “global other” is in our midst. The concept of cosmopolitanization is surrounded by misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The best way to make it comprehensible is through a paradigmatic example: that of global transplant medicine. The victory of global transplant surgery (and not its crisis!) has swept away its own ethical foundations and paved the way for a shadow economy that supplies the world market with “fresh” organs. In a radically unequal world, there is clearly no shortage of desperate individuals prepared to sell a kidney, a section of their liver, a lung, an eye, even a testicle for a tuppence. The destinies of patients waiting for organs in the centre is obscurely tied to the destinies of the destitute on the peripheries: both groups are fighting with problems of immediate survival. Thus arises what I call a real-existing cosmopolitanization of emergency.

In a fascinating case study, the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes has shown how the excluded of the world, the economically and politically disenfranchised – refugees, the homeless, street children, paperless migrants, ageing prostitutes, cigarette smugglers and thieves – feel forced to sell their organs. They are thereby physically, morally and economically “incorporated” into the fatally ill bodies of other people, people wealthy enough to purchase the organs of the global poor and to have their bodies “surgically patched up” with them.

Continents, “races”, classes, nations and religions merge in the cosmopolitanized, corporeal landscape of the individual. Muslim kidneys clean Christian blood. White racists breathe with the help of black lungs. The blond manager looks at the world with the eye of an African street child. A secular millionaire survives thanks to the liver cut out of a Protestant prostitute in a Brazilian favela. The bodies of the rich become patchwork quilts. The poor, in contrast, are maimed, becoming actual or potential one-eyed or one-kidneyed depositories of spare parts, “of their own free will” and “in their own interests”, as the wealthy sick repeat to themselves like a litany. The piecemeal sale of their organs is their life insurance. At the other end of the line evolves the biopolitical “world citizen” – a white, male body, fit or fat, with an Indian kidney or a Muslim eye.

Generally speaking, the traffic of living kidneys follows existing flows of capital from South to North, from poor to wealthy bodies, from black and brown bodies to white, from women to men or from poor men to richer men. Women are rarely the beneficiaries of purchased organs. The age of cosmopolitanization is thus divided into organ-selling and organ-buying nations. The global poor is in our corporeal midst – and for that reason alone is no longer a “global other”.

WikiLeaks as cosmopolitan subpolitics

Perfectly illustrated in the preceding example is the following: cosmopolitanization means the basic facts of the conditio humana at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The
dualisms into which the first, nationally organized modern was ordered and understood have, after the victory of universalized modernization processes (in this case transplant surgery), been dissolved and re-fused. This goes for national/international, us and them, inside and outside, as well as for the binaries nature and society, centre and periphery.

WikiLeaks, for example, in an act of cosmopolitan subpolitics, has completely undermined the basic distinction between “secret” and “not secret”, causing enormous turbulence throughout the nation-states as a whole, upturning their hierarchies, as well as destabilizing the geographical, historical or economic situation of individual states.

These facts of cosmopolitanization are certainly a concern of the social sciences, and therefore it is important to clearly distinguish between philosophical cosmopolitanism and sociological cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism, in the philosophical sense of Immanuel Kant and Jürgen Habermas, means something active, a task, a conscious decision, one that is clearly the responsibility of an elite and implemented from above. Today, on the other hand, a banal, forced and “impure” cosmopolitanization is unfolding, involuntary, unnoticed, powerfully and aggressively below the surface, behind the façade of existing national spaces, sovereign territories and etiquettes; from the top of society down to the everyday life of the family, in work situations, individual careers and bodies – although national flags are still waved and national attitudes, identities and forms of consciousness are even growing stronger.

Let’s take another example, only apparently extreme: the cosmopolitanization of the village. In practically every country in the Far East (though in Europe too), farmers are emerging as the biggest losers of “compressed modernization”. At first glance, most East Asian villages might appear relatively stable and well off; however they have seen an unprecedented exodus of inhabitants, especially young women. Paradoxically, migration from the countryside has given rise to fundamental new facts and categories of the “cosmopolitan marriage and family”, and thus the “cosmopolitan village”. [2] Like the sudden arrival of American and Japanese colonial masters in Korean villages in the early twentieth century, the unexpected appearance of “foreign brides” has forced today’s villagers to expose themselves to the experience of foreign worlds: the global Other lives and loves in or midst – and by no means only in the urban centres.

**Second: What is meant by the cosmopolitanization of Europe?**

The facts of cosmopolitanization first of all affect what sociology refers to as “intermediary institutions”: in other words the family; the household (“global care chains”); the workplace (since new processes of production relativize or even annul national organizational borders of production, thereby involuntarily producing a cosmopolitanization of territorially attached western centres of employment); the village; the banal, everyday cosmopolitanization of foodstuffs; and lastly the cosmopolitanization of art, science, religion etc.

All in all, it’s clear that one can’t only study the historical facts of cosmopolitanization at the meso-level of intermediary institutions, but that one also needs to look at the micro and macro-levels; cosmopolitanization, in other words, permeates the major fields of
communication, interaction and social and political praxes. This brings me to my key subject: reflexive Europeanization.

First of all, however, what do we mean by Europe?

Attempt to look more closely at Europe, either politically or social scientifically, and one ends up in a hall of mirrors. Europe gets bigger or smaller depending on your perspective; the slightest movement and its proportions are distorted. Where it begins and where it ends, what it is and what should it be - there are no straightforward and unambiguous answers. Whether one equates Europe with the European Union and its member states, or means a larger geographic and political space, including Russia and Belarus for example: Europe per se doesn’t exist, there is only Europeanization, understood as an institutionalized process of ongoing transformation. What “Europe” includes and excludes, where and how its territorial boundaries run, what institutional forms this Europe possesses and what institutional architecture it should possess in the future - none of this has been defined. Europe is not a fixed state of being. Europe is another word for a variable geometry, variable national interests, variable states of upset, variable relations towards interior and exterior factors, variable forms of statehood, variable identity. This is also the case for the institutionalized core of Europeanization, the European Union.

The EU as counter-image of nation state organization

On first approach, Europe seems to be merely the counter-image to nation-state organization: the EU is not a large nation, nor a super-state in which all other nation-states are sublimated. The highly particular, historically specific “power” of the EU, yet to be fully understood, resides, for example, in the fact that even non-member-states that want to become member-states (e.g. Turkey) are involved in an process of internal reform. In short: Europe is not a pre-existing spatial shell within which “Europeanization” can unfold, nor does there exist a conceptual model or a historical example of the goal to which this process leads.

We are currently seeing this in the eurocrisis. When the euro was introduced, many economists smugly warned that introducing the currency union without having established a political union was putting the cart before the horse. They couldn’t or didn’t want to understand that this was precisely the intention! The idea was that the euro and the predictable political problems would, through the force of material interest, force governments and nations, in thrall to national egoisms, to extend the political union - following the cosmopolitan imperative: cooperate or bust.

Europe as market has indeed been one of the contributing factors to the financial and budgetary crisis (see Ireland), while climate change and financial risks are causing the institutional instruments of the EU to become successively worthless. Until now, the EU has offered no institutionalized response. The EU cannot act, in other words - and the political initiatives for dealing with the crisis now lie entirely with the national governments. This situation needs to be described more precisely, of course.

New power relations have emerged in the current crisis of risk. In crucial moments, it is not the European Commission that acts, nor the EU president, nor the President of the
Council of Ministers. In serious cases, the ones who decide are the German chancellor Angela Merkel and the French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Didn’t Helmut Kohl, introducing the programme of his 1991-1994 government, declare that, “Germany is our fatherland, Europe our future”? And didn’t Willy Brandt, during the first meeting of the federal German parliament, say: “German and European belong together now and hopefully forever more”? The national-economic turn that Merkel has given this avowal has touched a raw nerve, not only among Germany’s neighbours. Where Europe is concerned, Angela Merkel acts like Angela Bush. Just as the US president used the risk of terror to thrust the unilateralism of his “war on terror” upon the rest of the world, so Angela Bush is using the European financial risk to unilaterally thrust German stability policy upon the rest of Europe.

The currency of German power used to be the deutschmark, now it is to be the euro. Currently threatened with collapse, the euro bears the retrospective and lasting imprint of deutschmark nationalism. We are currently seeing a German euro-nationalism that severs with the premise of multilateralism that has been so successful in post-war German politics. Clearly, the blindness of the faith in the nation-state prevails over its own historicity. The German post-war model embodied high-modern foreign policy: post-national, multilateral, highly peaceful in all respects, preaching interdependence in all directions, friends everywhere, nowhere daring to make enemies; “power” was almost a dirty word, to be replaced by “responsibility”; national interests remained, for good reason, always hidden discreetly, like a Biedermeier console, under a thick cloth embroidered with the words “Europe”, “peace”, “collaboration”, “stability”, “normality”, even “humanity”.

Is it really the case, or does it just seem so, that the united Europe referred to in the preamble of the German constitution is no longer the guiding light either of German politics or of German self-conception? The question remains open. What is clear, however, is that Europe is currently confronted with the inadequacy of its institutions. What has also recently become clear is that a Europe without a European fiscal and economic policy will lead to disaster.

**Europe seen from without**

Perspectives on the cosmopolitanization of Europe have so far ignored (and I mean this self-critically) the question of the influence exerted by de-colonization upon the emergence and subsequent development of the European Union. Here, too, it is the victories of modern, industrial capitalism and its effects – global risks, crises and geopolitical shifts, especially since 1989 – that call into question the bases of nation-state orders both inside and outside Europe.

From the perspective of the developing countries, however, the present picture of Europe is somewhat different. It is characterized by a power shift in favour of postcolonial, developing countries (reflected in their participation in the new G20 meetings, for example); a shift in the global economic geography of power from the Atlantic to the Pacific; and the steady de-monopolization of the US dollar as the leading global currency in favour of a conglomeration of various currencies and bilateral currency treaties. In addition comes the increasing significance of South-South and East-South partnerships for the resolution of economic problems, not to mention the loss of moral authority and
exemplariness of the former Euro-American centre.

The result is that old, western dominated centre-periphery models are in danger of collapsing. In the future, things will not revolve primarily around the relation between postcolonialism and Europe. More pertinent will be the extent to which we are seeing the start of a kind of “pre-colonialization” of the former centre, Europe, by its former colonies, in particular China and India.

China, at any rate, is becoming increasingly involved in European concerns – though ironically by no means to Europe’s disadvantage, but in support of the euro and thus the European Union – for reasons of Chinese self-interest. Itself in possession of immense euro reserves, China initially came to Greece’s help with a loan of over 3.6 billion euros and the purchase of government bonds, and has since offered Spain similar assistance. All this naturally shifts the global structure of power immensely.

**Third: From the critique of methodological nationalism to the alternative of methodological cosmopolitanism**

The new facts of Europe’s postcolonial cosmopolitanization will come into focus only when the narrow-mindedness of the still prevailing methodological nationalism is overcome.

Methodological nationalism assumes that nation, state and society are “natural” social and political forms of the modern world. It assumes a “natural” division of humanity into a limited number of nations that organize themselves from within and demarcate themselves externally by drawing boundaries between themselves and other nations. It goes still further to represent this external demarcation, in connection with the competition between nation-states, as the central category of political organization. Indeed, all sociological thought until now, perhaps even the sociological imagination, has been in thrall to the nation state. Precisely this methodological nationalism prevents the social sciences from shifting the focus of the analysis to the process of cosmopolitanization in general and Europeanization in particular.

Where social actors adhere to this belief, I talk of a “national perspective”; where it determines the view of social scientists, I talk of “methodological nationalism”. Methodological nationalism is no superficial problem or cosmetic error. It affects the process of data collection and generation as well as the basic concepts of modern sociology and political science, concepts such as “society”, “social inequality”, “family”, “work”, “religion”, “state”, “democracy” and “imagined communities”.

A key question that arises with regard to methodological cosmopolitanism is: How can units of study be found and defined outside the framework of methodological nationalism that allow the complex processes and (inter-)dependencies of cosmopolitanization to be understood and analysed on a comparative basis? What can be the object of social scientific analysis if, on the one hand, one frees it from the container of the nation-state, but, on the other hand, wants to avoid taking recourse to the abstract concepts of the “world society”?

Recent empirical research in disciplines as varied as sociology, ethnology, anthropology,
geography and political science have developed a large number of concepts all of which aim to break from the supposedly “natural” equation between “society/nation/state”. Paul Gilroy’s concept of the “Black Atlantic”, Saskia Sassen’s identification of the “global city”, Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “scapes”, Martin Albrow’s concept of the “global age”, and my own analysis of the “cosmopolitan Europe” are just some examples of research in this direction. [3]

Particularly pertinent for methodological cosmopolitanism is the question of the importance of the national and the nation-state in defining units of study. Methodologically, the most radical option is to replace the national frame of the unit of study with other foci (“replacing the national”). However, if one were to reduce methodological cosmopolitanism thus, one would unduly limit its scope and its applicability. Empirical globalization research has long since shown that in the global era, the nation-state does not disappear entirely, and that it even gains value.

The EU as “lame duck”

This is perfectly exemplified by the global financial risks that have caused a devaluation of the institutional instruments of the EU. The EU has become a “lame duck” only able to grow new wings in the course of the European initiatives of national governments, in particular Germany and France. It is worthwhile, then, to consider the possibility that the nation-state will continue to exist, however that it will lose its epistemological monopoly. The methodological task would now be to find new units of study in which the national is contained, however which are no longer one and the same thing as the national. This embedding of the national in processes of cosmopolitanization can happen in various ways. The new units of study developed in this variant of methodological cosmopolitanism are correspondingly wide-ranging. One example is the concept of the “transnational political regime”. [4] This refers to new forms of transnational institution-building that have emerged in connection with a series of problems of global regulation. These institutions organize transnational interactions whose borders are not defined through national sovereignty. They thereby integrate very different and extremely variable groups of actors (public and private) and extend across various territorial levels. These political regimes are often the most appropriate unit of study for an empirical analysis of transnational political regimes.

Crucial here is that these new institutions do not replace the nation-state but rather integrate it. Nation-states are embedded in new transnational systems of regulation; one of the most important tasks of empirical research is the analysis of the specific significance that they assume in the framework of these institutions. Where the nation-state continues to be dominant, as one can regularly observe in international climate politics, be it in Copenhagen or Cancun, then the transnational level is in danger of degenerating into a mere “theatre” of the national.

Fourth: Political consequences - the five delusions of national politics in the global era

The quasi-subcutaneous continuation of the dominance of national politics contrasts drastically with the five delusions of national politics in the global era.
The first delusion – one might call it the delusion of the “globalized world” – is expressed in the famous sentence: “No-one can do politics against the market”. Joschka Fischer’s dictum was exemplary of the self-understanding of the political class in the previous two decades. Politicians saw themselves as caught up in a power game dominated by global capital. This is the delusion of political innocence, in two senses.

On the one hand, it conceals the fact that the political class has actively brought about its own impotence: it was the political class that implemented the rules of the globalized market at the national level in the first place (as “reforms”). In doing so, it generated the supposedly uncontrollable “destiny of globalization”. Note: global capital obtains its “inviolable” power only when politics actively carries out its self-abolition.

On the other hand, the impotence of politics, for which it is itself to blame, serves as an excuse for resisting the increasing pressure to act exerted by global risks, and for failing to exploit the opportunities for global action that simultaneously arise. The argument runs thus: since there is no global political response to the consequences of globalization, and never can be one, nothing is possible!

However there is the strategic option of turning this argument on its head: politicians arouse expectations only when everyone knows they can’t be fulfilled. For example, before a G20 meeting or a climate conference, vociferous demands are made (with one eye on domestic politics) for a global transaction or Tobin tax, in the full knowledge that there is no chance of it being introduced. The motto, “Everything is only possible globally, that’s why nothing is possible” enables the intended severance of word and deed. The more intangible the declared goal, the more freely one can demand it, posing as a pioneer of the global good, the beautiful and the necessary without worrying about ever having to get one’s hands dirty. The rhetoric of emancipation enters into secret wedlock with the defence of the status quo.

The national delusion

The national delusion propagates the exact opposite of the global, as if its mirror-image: it assumes that in real-existing cosmopolitization, the return to the idyll of the nation state is possible. Hence everywhere the same lament: Europe is a faceless bureaucracy, Europe erodes democracy, Europe undermines the plurality of nations. There might be plenty of truth to this, however the critique becomes false when based on the premise that there can be no democracy without nations. According to this logic of the nation-state, a post-national Europe is necessarily also post-democratic. This in turn means that more EU equals less democracy.

This argumentation is wrong for two major reasons, and at the same time reveals very clearly the narrow-mindedness of the national viewpoint. First, its advocates fail to understand that the route to a democratic Europe cannot be identical with the route taken to national democracy. Second, the concept of democracy, as used for the EU, must be different. The EU consists of democratic states but is not a state in the conventional sense. The question therefore arises whether the model of democracy developed for the modern nation-state can be transferred onto the EU, or whether, for the democratic legitimation of the EU, other, post-national approaches need to be conceptualized.
Both errors – the absolutization of the concept of national democracy and the fact that the necessary and historically specific route to the democratization of Europe is misunderstood – are founded in this nostalgic tendency to absolutize the national.

**The neoliberal delusion**

The third great delusion is closely linked to that of the national. In the post-Cold War era, neoliberal globalization became a crucial normative and political force. All those who submit to the commandments of the global market will be blessed with earthly riches – such is the promise repeatedly renewed upon the altar of the omnipotent God of the market. Ultimately, neoliberalism claims to be the better socialism that, with the help of the global trade regime (and only with its help), will succeed in eradicating poverty, not only nationally but also globally, and thus build a better world.

Yet the putative order to which the neoliberal coalition of capital and state has given rise is currently being abandoned: global risks empower nation-states and social movements, since these bring to light new sources of legitimacy and options for action; on the other hand, these disempower globalized capital, since the consequences of investment decisions now create incalculable and existentially threatening global risks.

How, and how much, the neoliberal utopia of world improvement has emerged to be a delusion can be clearly seen in the “conversion effect”. Political parties and governmental heads that before the financial crisis were propagating the norms of “good budgeting” (low inflation, balanced budget, reduction of trade barriers and exchange rate controls, maximum freedom for capital, minimal regulation of the labour market and a slim and adaptable state that forces its citizens out to work) are now advocating precisely what Oskar Lafontaine, the SPD finance minister during the Schröder government, was mocked for saying: that a regulatory corset needs to be imposed on global finance capital.

**The neo-Marxist delusion**

Paradoxically, the great neo-Marxist delusion is the pitch-black twin of the neoliberal one. Global capitalism’s biggest critics turn out to be apologists for the neoliberal global market. They too see a transformation of the (welfare) state, however solely in terms of the self-accommodation of national politics to the dominance of the global market, which ultimately leads to the self-dissolution of politics. However neo-Marxists and neoliberals evaluate the ensuing global situation in precisely opposite ways: the world economy breaks the bounds of national economic power, forcing the opening of borders and thus conquering the emergent space of global political power. The possibility that this shock also opens up new fields of action, resources and opportunities for all actors, both within and beyond the national, does not occur in the neo-Marxist perspective, at least not beyond marginal academic “international political economy”. Therefore, unfortunately, I can see no approach to the transnational redefinition of the political coming from within the Left spectrum.

**The technocratic delusion**
If the previous positions posit a minimalization of political options, then the technocratic position, mindful of the dangers threatening mankind, particularly global warming, seeks the maximalization of scope for political action. Climate researchers may be great realists, however socially and politically they are often also idealists, treating all people as small-time environmental scientists, and therefore incapable of understanding why their apocalyptic calculations don’t immediately trigger the necessary counter action.

We thus arrive at the technocratic delusion. In the world of the *homo oecologicus*, democracy is of secondary importance and the inequalities created by climate change and climate policies sidelined. The danger arises of a short circuit between horrifyingly beautiful images of melting icecaps and the necessity for a kind of emergency expertocracy that, in the interests of universal survival, asserts the global good against national interests and democratic prejudices.

The three components – anticipation of human catastrophe, the increasingly constrictive time span, and the patent inability of democracy to act decisively – lead to the vision of the “strong”, “interventionist” and “ascetic” redistributive state proposed by Wolfgang Harich [5] haunting the minds of engaged environmentalists. Thought through to their logical end, ideas like this result in eco-dictatorial models.

**Political consequences with regard to Europe**

What can be concluded from these five political delusions – particularly with regard to the persistent crisis of the European Union.

There is no avoiding two insights: First, that national politics in the global era can only regain sovereignty, credibility and the ability to shape events if they adopt the form of transnational cooperation – see the EU as the prime example of this. National sovereignty cannot be won back nationally, but only globally.

Second: if the EU collapses, then the EU member-states will also be endangered. There can be no politically strong Germany, let alone an export and economic miracle, without the EU. Therefore it is in the national and the European interests of the European nation-states that there is not less but more reflexive Europeanization. Only then can they avoid their own collapse, which they themselves have brought about with the crisis of the euro.

In earlier days, questions of macro-politics used to decide German elections – alliance with the West (Adenauer), economic miracle (Erhardt), *Ostpolitik* (Brandt) and unification (Kohl). Today, particularly in view of the “super election year” 2012, the big macro-political task is the rescue of the European Union and its primary economic medium, the euro, an issue capable of mobilizing opposing factions within national borders. National macro-policy can only be revived through its Europeanization. More broadly speaking: macro-policy in Europe either takes place cross-borders or not at all!

Perhaps things will move in this direction after all. In times of crisis, it is the euro that protects us, insofar as it forces us to increase cooperation and thereby brings us forward. Even the German chancellor now seems to have recognized this (“If the euros fails, then Europe fails too”). And after the crisis we will need more Europe again in order to overcome the next crisis – always following the cosmopolitical imperative: cooperate or
bust!

Footnotes


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