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The debate about the “finalité” of EU-reforms. A noteworthy rejection of a European federal “nation state” among German intellectuals¹

Manuel Franzmann, Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Abstract:

For some months, a vivid intellectual debate has taken place in the German press about the “finalité” of institutional reforms within the European Union. The majority of its participants outright reject the outlook of a European federal “nation state”. At first glance, their primary argument seems to be conclusive: A complete “communitisation” (in the sense of the sociological distinction between “community” and “society”) of the European Union would be an excessive demand for the centuries old national bonds. (Such a communitisation would imply a fully developed European federal “nation state”.) Accordingly, it seems reasonable to restrict the EU to a limited form of supra-national cooperation between independent nation-states, which conclude intergovernmental contracts. However, the story seems to be more complicated. With the crisis of the EU, it has become obvious that with the implementation of the economic and monetary union, the EU states lost an immense amount of national sovereignty and already crossed the line of *limited* contract-based interstate cooperation that follows the logic of “societalization”. They now deeply depend on each other and are in need of joint action, which thoroughly affects their lives. They increasingly resemble a “totality” of a common life, of a “community”, but without perceiving themselves as such, i.e. as a developing *new Nation* “Europe”.

Keywords: political sociology; finalité of the EU; public debate in Germany; federal state; EU-crisis

Introduction

For some months, German newspapers and magazines have published a series of articles about the “finalité” of EU-reforms. Despite the dominant consensus that the persistent crisis of the European Union calls for more and not less Europe, the majority of writers, commentators and intellectuals involved in this debate reject outright the perspective of a European nation-state, even if you label it a “post-national” or “federal” state. The main reason put forward for this is that a European federal state would be at least unrealistic in the face of the lack of will to European solidarity and centuries old national bonds. It is no question that this argument makes a lot of sense. It is astounding, however, how quickly any discussion about a European federal state ends with it. This suggests that we do not really *need* a European federal state, neither to overcome the actual crisis of the European Union nor to prepare for a future of multipolar power spheres. In this paper, I argue that such a perception seems to be illusory. My paper is to be understood as a step towards a sociological research project, which shall explore the involved “background” of interpretation patterns regarding the Political, based on documents and in-depth interviews with politicians of the European Union.

The rejection of a federal state – an example

A prominent example for this rejection of a European federal state that I quote now for the purpose of illustration is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In an interview with Francis Fukuyama about Habermas' new book “The Crisis of the European Union: A Response” Habermas explains his rejection. He says:

“If we are to cease shirking the question of the ‘finalité’ of the unification process, we must lay down the correct parameters. A federal state on the model of the United States or the German federal republic is the wrong model; for that would be to set an unrealistically ambitious goal – one more ambitious than is necessary or sensible. (...) a Commission that would have been transformed into a government would not have to be predominantly responsible toward the European Parliament, as required by the pattern of a federal state. For the purpose of democratic legitimation it would be sufficient that a European government be responsible in equal measure to the Parliament and the Council in which the national governments are represented.” (Habermas 2012)²

“Community” vs. “Society”, the European Union as a hybrid

In order to show what seems to be illusory with this argumentation, I have to make use of the old sociological distinction between “community” and “society” that goes back to the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887, 1957) and was later adopted by Durkheim, Weber and others. It allows for the outlining of a general structural

problem of the political institutions of the European Union that has developed gradually and meanwhile takes serious proportions. In the language of these terms, the European Union is a contradictory hybrid between “community” and “society”. It has started as “society” on the institutional level and later moved towards “community”, but actually never reached the point of a political constitution as “community”. This would imply a federal state that represents the instrument to act as a community.

Before elaborating on this hybrid condition, I have to give some explanatory words about the central analytical distinction used here. What is the difference between “community” and “society”? A community is holistic, a society specific. Within a community, you are relevant as a whole person, whereas in society you only count as carrier of a special function or role, i.e. in a limited regard. This implies that in a community usually every topic is permitted for discussion, whereas in society the allowed topics are limited to the specific roles, functions and forms of cooperation. Community also implies solidarity, whereas in society the emphasis is on pursuing one’s self-interest—e.g. through contracting with others. In a community, you often share your life and your emotions, whereas society is marked by interpersonal distance. Everybody is regarded as replaceable. Community comprises the totality of life, whereas society appears in this regard only as an abstraction. There is much more to say about the difference between community and society, but these rather unsystematic remarks should suffice to illustrate it a bit and to evoke a rough understanding.³

There are some sociologists who follow the “founder” of this distinction (Tönnies) in thinking that “community” is a social phenomenon, which is restricted to relationships in social proximity (e.g. family relations) and gets overarched by society in the historical emergence of modernity. In this perspective, the nation state is seen as “society”. However, this would be a fundamental “category mistake” with serious consequences for theorizing about the Political. The nation state has to be seen as a political “community” or more precisely as the instrument for acting as a political community. It embodies (as legal community) the “non-contractual elements in contracts” Durkheim was interested in and is the carrier of a shared culture with values that developed from its history. It has an obligation to solidarity towards its members that has become in some way operationalized in the modern welfare state. The political community has the right to impose obligations upon its members as well as upon its guests *without* their contractual agreement. If you die as a soldier who serves your national community you not only lose a specific role and function, you lose your whole life. These are only a few examples that should demonstrate the community character of the nation state. This nation state should be seen primarily as a universalistic *model* of political community, at least in its fully developed, democratized shape. In this respect, it represents something *abstract*, a structure that would be valid for a European political community as well.

Societal relationships, on the other hand, are to be found *within* a nation state and *out of it*. The former constitute a society that, metaphorical speaking, builds a politically and legally regulated social space “between” state and communities within the social proximities—such as families and friendships. The latter exist in the rather sparsely regulated sphere between the states. They dominate the process of globalization. The difference between them is the presence or absence of a politically communitarized social framework with its regulations and rules.

Now let us look at the history of the European Union and its predecessors. As is well known, political elites started this European project in the face of two World Wars and of the human catastrophes in the first half of the 20th century. This historical context stimulated a strong sense of cooperation and an impulse focusing on the community of humankind. In this respect, the whole European undertaking appears “communitarized” right from the beginning. However, as important as it is, this is something *informal*. On the formal level, the building of European institutions began dominantly in the mode of societalization, i.e. with limited, specified, contractual relationships to the mutual benefit between autonomous nation-states. The areas of cooperation grew massively over time and developed a highly institutionalized shape. This process was accompanied by a growing symbolism of a European community and led to the transferring of sovereign rights of the participating nation states to European institutions.

That is the point where the mentioned structural problem emerged and became progressively stronger. It is that the political communities of the participating nation states are weakened in their sovereignty in favor of a hybrid political entity, which has not yet constituted itself as a political community and which is tied to the logic of societalization. In effect, this means an *institutional* weakening of “community” as a political and social framework for everything else. It must be compensated with a great deal of effort by the strong informal community impulse among political leaders in Europe. If the majority of EU citizens could perceive the European Union as a political community in its own right and not only as an hybrid entity based on limited interstate agreements, there would be no reason any more not to transfer the universalistic model of the democratized nation state with its historical achievements up to the European level. Therefore, as it seems, the often-criticized democratic deficit of the EU, its underdeveloped social infrastructure and other shortcomings in comparison to the standards of the nation state must be explained by the not yet constituted political community of the EU. I see two major barriers to it: first, the lack of political support among intellectuals, politicians and citizens, and second, the practical difficulty to find a wise synthesis between the different variations of the nation state within the member countries of the EU—this is a complex challenge with lots of questions of detail. However, it should be clear that the leading problem is the lack of political support. In this respect, Habermas argumentation has a somewhat positivistic touch. Accordingly, he adds in his interview with Francis Fukuyama with

firm absoluteness: “It is true that the citizens will always have closer ties to their nation state than to the European Union“. But is this a fact written in some sort of book of nature? One thing seems clear: without the support of strong intellectual voices, the necessary change in the perceptions of citizens and in the European public will not take place. Therefore, there is a danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy in argumentations like the one of Habermas. However, the main point seems to be that he does not see any need for a European federal state and for a constitution as political community, neither now nor in the future. This goes hand in hand with a philosophical cosmopolitanism and post-nationalism that prematurely regards the nation state as obsolete and orientates towards a vague “world society”.⁴

The current crisis as indecisiveness between “community” and “society”

Let us move on now to the current crisis of the European Union that, of course, has many aspects, causes and consequences. Here, our focus has to be on the contradictory, hybrid constitution of EU institutions that move between society and community. In this respect, the turning point in the history of the European Union and in the formation of the complex crisis seems to be the implementation of the economic and monetary union. With it, the participating EU member states in some way crossed a line because they now gave up very important aspects of their economic autonomy. The current crisis illustrates this particularly regarding the monetary policy. In history, states have financed whole wars with their monetary policy. They have managed their national debt; stimulated economic growth; put their national economy in an advantageous position in relation to the world market through the devaluation of their currencies. The current tragedy of Greece is in part due to the lack of its former monetary autonomy. For this reason, some economists call for a temporary or longer return of Greece to its drachma. The main alternative to such an approach of turning the clocks back seems to be moving on and completing the political communitisation with a European federal state. This conclusion is backed by the “optimum currency area theory” that has become an important intellectual resource to analyse the current crisis of the European Union. According to this theory (Mundell 1961) there are four main characteristics of a currency area that provide stability of the currency: homogeneity, flexibility, mobility and solidarity. The Eurozone clearly falls short in all four compared to the Dollar zone of the USA. The Belgian philosopher and economist Philippe Van Parijs has very convincingly argued (Van Parijs 2012) that the most realistic prospect for advancement in stabilizing the Eurozone is the construction of an effective infrastructure of solidarity. But how to build such an infrastructure without the constitution of a European political community?

Conclusion

Let me conclude this presentation with a short summary. With the economic and monetary union, the participating member states put themselves in the same boat on such a large scale that the resulting consequences begin to burst the limits and rock the entire boat, causing comprehensive problems. For this reason, you can say that all citizens of the EU already form an actual “community of consequences”. However, they still do not see and constitute themselves as a “political community” along the standards of the fully developed model of the nation state, which would allow *acting as a community* in a democratically legitimized way and with a built in infrastructure of solidarity. To this day, the political institutions of the EU remain limited or “societal” in their framework to deal with these far-reaching consequences.

Information about the author see: www.manuelfranzmann.de

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Notes:

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² For Habermas’ contribution to the debate in Germany, see: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/europas-zukunft/kurswechsel-fuer-europa-einspruch-gegen-die-fassadendemokratie-11842820-11.html>

³ See also Oevermann 2000.

⁴ „Here we are dealing with the very first instance of an accommodation of sovereign nation states – moreover, the first generation of particularly self-confident nation states with their own imperial pasts – to the postnational constellation of an emerging world society.” (Habermas 2012)