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Euroscepticism and Europhobia: the threat of populism

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Abstract :

For more than 25 years [1] the citizens of western democracies have been expressing their growing mistrust of their institutions and of the politicians managing their national democracies [2]. The European Union does not escape this rule [3]. However the erosion of confidence in the Union, as well as the rise of various forms of euroscepticism and the europhobia resulting from this, follow specific triggers that need to be analysed if the democratic challenge against the European Union is to be overcome.

EUROSCEPTICISM AND EUROPHOBIA: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The idea of euroscepticism emerged in the 1980's to describe British mistrust of the project to deepen European integration; the term then spread to all of those who were reluctant to further integration. Developments in public opinion regarding European issues can be characterised by three main stages [4]. Firstly, a structural change occurred starting from the 1990's by the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty [5]. The significant increase in the European Union's competences, together with greater consultation of people via referendum led to the end of what was called the "permissive consensus" [6] of opinion regarding European integration, i.e. the end of the tacit consent of citizens to community integration since the beginning of the 1950's which underpinned "functionalist" approach to the Union's legitimisation. Then the French and Dutch "no" to the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, followed by the Irish "no" to the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 challenged the foundations of the permissive consensus theory. It was from this standpoint that Hooghe and Marks developed the theory of "constraining dissensus", marked by an increase in the divisive nature of European questions and of their use by political players to partisan ends [7]. This theory relates the emergence of a political division over European issues and a politicisation of public opinion regarding European affairs [8].

Thirdly, the crisis affecting the European Union has led to a decline in citizen support and confidence to the Union and its institutions, thereby confirming this observation [9]. Only one third of Europeans say they trust the community's institutions, i.e. the lowest level ever reached. The majority of citizens believe that their voice is not being heard by them. However, there is a linkage between confidence and the support to the political system that forms the base of the legitimacy of the system in question [10]. Unsurprisingly those who are most mistrustful of Europe's institutions are from the Member States that have been the most affected by the crisis (Greece and Spain notably), as well as from countries in which euroscepticism is traditionally strong (UK). The decline in confidence is strong and widespread in all 28 Member States (except for in Finland and Sweden), independent of the size of the country (large" or "small"), of the length of EU membership and even of the benefits enjoyed by this membership [11]. *Last but not least*, the most recent research shows that euroscepticism tends to develop under the effects of the crisis, not only in countries that have been severely affected, but also in countries in which economic results have been good. This is the case, for example, in Germany where public opinion fears that a downturn in economic and budgetary conditions (high levels of unemployment and public debt) in other Member States (for example in Greece) may have a spill over effect and a negative impact on their domestic economy and on the Union's ability to

1. This text will be published in the next version of the Schuman Report on Europe. The State of the Union 2016, Editions Lignes de repères (to be published in March 2016).

2. Cf. for example P. Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Governance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999; J. S. Nye, P. H. Zelikow, D. C. King (eds.), *Why People Don't Trust Government*, Cambridge / London, Harvard University Press, 1997; P. Perrineau (dir.), *Le désenchantement démocratique, La Tour d'Aigues, Les Editions de l'Aube*, 2003.

3. B. Cautrès, *Les Européens aiment-ils (toujours) l'Europe ?*, Paris, La documentation française, 2014.

4. S. Vasilopoulou, "Continuity and Change in the Study of Euroscepticism", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 51, n°1, 2013, pp. 153-168.

5. R. C. Eichenberg and R. J. Dalton, "Post-Maastricht Blues: The Transformation of Citizen Support for European Integration, 1973-2004", *Acta Politica*, vol. 42, n° 2-3, 2007, pp. 128-152.

6. The expression "permissive consensus" was invented by V. O. Jr. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1961 and was taken up again for the first time regarding European integration by Lindberg and Steingold in *assessment of the support of public opinion to European integration in L. N. Lindberg and S. A. Scheingold, Europe's Would Be Polity. Patterns of Change in the European Community*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1970.

7. L. Hogge and G. Marks, "A Postfunctional Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus", *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39 Issue 01, January 2008, pp. 1-23.

8. Cf. C. Belot, B. Cautrès and S. Strudel, "L'Europe comme enjeu civique", *Revue française de science politique*, 63(6), 2013, pp. 1081-1112.

9. B. Cautrès, "Un effondrement de la confiance dans l'UE ? Les attitudes des Européens vis-à-vis de l'Europe au cours de la Grande Récession", in C. Blot, O. Rozenberg, F. Saraceno et I. Streho (dir.) *Réformer l'Europe, Revue de l'OFCE, Débats et politiques*, n° 134, Sciences Po, 2014, pp. 19-27.

10. On this point see for example, C. Belot, "Support (by the citizens of the EU) is the cornerstone to this citizenship since it represents an initial form of recognition of the legitimacy of the European political system", *Les logiques sociologiques de soutien au processus d'intégration européenne: éléments d'interprétation*, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 9 (1), 2002, p. 12.

11. Cf. K. Armigean and B. Caka "The Loss of Trust in the European Union during the Great Recession since 2008: the Role of Huristics from the National System", *European Union Politics*, 15(1), 2014, pp. 82-107.

achieve positive economic results [12]. Beyond this, whilst economic and social indicators are improving, political indicators (confidence in the European Union and in the EU institutions) are stagnating. This shows the fact that how the Union's democracy functions has become a decisive factor in explaining the continuation of political mistrust [13]. In 2015, less than half of Europe's citizens (46%) have said that they are happy with the way democracy functions in the European Union [14]. There is, therefore, a political rift within the EU, as highlighted by other evidence, notably by electoral outcomes (rise of populism and extremes etc...). By not taking the issue of democracy seriously and by not responding to it, there is a danger of deep and long lasting divorce between the Union and its citizens [15].

Although the analysis of developments in public opinion highlights a decline in citizens' support to Europe and its institutions, in other words, an increase in euroscepticism, this idea, however, encompasses extremely different political trends. On the one hand, the sovereigntists, with nationalist leanings, believe that the national State should not be questioned and focus on the identity and the migration issues. On the other, the anti-liberals believe that European integration is dictated by a neo-liberal economic rationale, which is unravelling national social systems and must therefore be countered. Finally, some trends combine the two mentioned above, which might be called "leftwing sovereigntism" [16]. Academic works at the end of the 2000's, particularly those of Szczerbiak and Taggart, separated "soft" and "hard" euroscepticism in a bid to distinguish contestation from total rejection or europhobia [17]. As for the former case, euroscepticism accepts the principle of European integration while criticising certain public policies, the proponents of the latter campaign for a total rejection of belonging to the Union and express their desire to leave it (this is the case for example with the FN (Front National) in France, UKIP in the UK and the PVV in the Netherlands). Even though one should not overestimate the impact of the electoral rise of populism, just like far right nationalists, on political balances at European Union level [18], it remains that the spread of the discourse carried by these political groups and the erosion of the fundamental principles

that form the heart of the European idea, constitute a real danger of national withdrawal amongst the 28 Member States.

POPULISM AND EUROPEAN POLITICAL CRISIS

In spite of their diversity, the all different forms of euroscepticism and europhobia converge towards a populist rhetoric, a term which also deserves clarification. The general features of populism are quite easy to identify: denunciation of the elites – political, economic and social – accused of having stolen power and betrayed the people, the only valid basis for legitimate authority. From this standpoint the people are defined either on a sociological basis, via reference to certain specific social groups, or on a nationalist basis – in both cases in a three-pronged movement to exacerbate the differences that are deemed to be external or foreign: from a moral point of view, against the "corrupt"; from a social point of view in the traditional denunciation of the elites; and from an ethnic point of view against foreigners. *Last but not least*, the people are then enlisted in a bid to revive a feeling of failed representation and identity.

Beyond this, populism reflects one of the vital tensions which form the core of the democratic regime. The tension lies between the popular or populist principle in the literal sense [19] – and the liberal principle. The liberal system that is based on a constitutionalist rationale of the rule of law and the separation of powers, cannot respond alone to the democratic requirements demanded by the democratic justification of power and decisions on the basis of popular legitimacy. Criticism of the European Union finds its source at this difficult and constantly unstable juncture [20]. On a political level, this argument enables eurosceptics and also europhobes, to point, in often radical ways, to the weaknesses in the institutional mechanisms producing the democratic legitimisation of European decisions on a popular basis. It is this rationale that fosters the return of debate of traditional opposition in populist rhetoric between Brussels – deemed to be a technocratic bubble – and the people [21].

The revival of populism is an extremely strong symptom of the Union's political crisis. From

12. D. Ioannou, J.-F. Jamet and J. Kleibl, "Spillovers and Euroscepticism", ECB Working Paper, European Central Bank, n° 1818, June 2015.

13. P. Perrineau, "Public Opinion in Europe : an early end to the crisis » in Schuman Report on Europe. State of the Union 2015, Paris, Lignes de repères, 2015, pp.167-172. See also Emmanuel Rivière, « Opinions et démocratie. Les terreaux du populisme », in Commentaire, n°152, hiver 2015-2016.

14. Eurobarometer standard 83, Spring 2015.

15. T. Chopin, *La fracture politique de l'Europe. Crise de légitimité et déficit politique*, Bruxelles, Éditions Larcier, 2015.

16. D. Reynié, *Le vertige social-nationaliste*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2005. See also D. Halikiopoulou, K. Nanou, S. Vasilopoulou, "The paradox of nationalism: the common denominator of radical right and radical left Euroscepticism", *European Journal of Political Research*, 51, 2012, pp. 504-539 and D. Halikiopoulou "Radical left-wing Euroscepticism in the 2014 elections: a cross-European comparison", in *Is Europe afraid of Europe? An Assessment of the result of the 2014 European Elections*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies / Karamanlis Foundation, Brussels / Athens, 2014

17. A. Szczerbiak, P. Taggart (eds.), *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008. Some research on the issue call for the abandonment of the idea of Euroscepticism deemed to be too political since it is used to disqualify this political rival or that to the benefit of analyses of different type of resistance to European integration; see for example J. Lacroix and R. Coman (dir.), *Les résistances à l'Europe*. Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2007.

18. Y. Bertoncini et N. Koenig, "Euroscepticism or europhobia: voice vs. exit?", Policy paper n°121, Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014 ; and also N. Brack, "Radical and Populist Eurosceptic Parties at the 2014 European Elections: A Storm in a Teacup?", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, n°2, 2015, pp. 7-17.

19. Cf. for example R. Dahl who opposed populist and Madisonian regimes, in *Preface to Democratic Theory*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1956.

20. Y. Mény and Y. Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, New York Palgrave, 2002.

21. Cf. C. Bickerton et C. Invernizzi Accetti, "Populism and Technocracy: Opposites or Complements?", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, n°4, 2015.

Denmark to Hungary, passing via France, the different national elections confirm the strength of the far right and populist parties that are diffusing protectionists discourse closely related to economic, cultural and identity narratives in public debate, Undoubtedly, the reasons that account for these developments differ from one country to another as contemporary forms of populism are multiple [22]: from the nationalism of the “wealthy” [23] in Catalonia, in Flanders and the North of Italy, to the return of national aspirations in Central Europe, sometimes in the shape of an authoritarian national-populism, as in Hungary at present, or the effects of demographic development of more or less ageing societies in the North of Europe, convergence seems difficult to find.

However, explanation of a kind can be put forward so that overall coherence can be given to these political developments which all threaten the foundations of the Union.

Firstly, from an economic point of view, the return of populism is undoubtedly related to economic and financial crisis that has been affecting Europeans since 2008. [24] It is in this context that the far right parties in Europe are increasingly turning into the mouthpiece of exasperation and social anger which explains the popularisation of their electorate. Undoubtedly, it is linked from a general point of view with the feeling of economic destabilisation and of identity problems felt by many public opinions in an environment of international opening over the last twenty five years. [25] The globalisation of the economy is paradoxically leading towards inward-looking attitudes, which grow stronger in periods of crisis: internally there is a rekindled longing for narcissistic self-image; hostility towards foreigners and a return of xenophobic discourse in certain European countries in a renewed form of the “scape-goat” mechanism as highlighted by René Girard. Since foreigners are deemed to be responsible for economic and social ills, including from the point of view of insecurity; from an external point of view: return of national border controls encouraged by the refugee crisis and by terrorist attacks; the toughening up of European societies from within, reflected in the desire for self-protection against migration from the East and the South.

Then demographically, the return of populism to economically prosperous countries (for example Denmark and Sweden) finds explanation in the first signs from societies whose populations are growing old, which are not just typified by economic fears but rather by those linked to the transformation of an environment with which they can no longer identify [26]. This explains the renewed importance of the theme of religion – notably Islam – and the exercise of religions in European societies.

Finally, from a more direct political point of view, there are several, easily identifiable symptoms of the crisis of the principles of the liberal democracy and the rule of law: the exasperation of many citizens regarding financial and tax scandals as well as affairs of corruption which feed the “anti-establishment” line of criticism at the heart of populist discourse; the development of a discourse in which security is presented as the first freedom and in whose name the foundation of other freedoms is undermined; relegation of the primacy of fundamental rights to a secondary level etc... More importantly, the return of populism reflects a crisis of representation [27] – in the completest sense of the term – which is no longer fulfilling its role of representing European societies, which have become individualistic and highly fragmented. In consequence the temptation to revive old images of the population and the nation in a bid to rekindle the flawed feeling of a protective, reassuring identity and to recover the sense of belonging to a community.

Although the European Union is not necessarily a condition for the existence of these populist movements, it exacerbates the ideas that they convey: distance between citizens and their governments; difficult relationship with representative democracy, identity and community, the opening/closure dialectic, freedom/security relations, threatened Welfare State etc... From this point of view, Europe’s present weaknesses might be considered not so much as triggers, but as multiplier effects of certain demands, focusing notably on the quest for community and identity on the right, as well as a demand for equality and social justice on the left.

22. S. Gherghina, S. Miscoiu, S. Soare (eds.), *Contemporary Populism: a Controversial Concept and its Diverse Forms*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013; Ch. Couvrat, J.-Y. Thériault (dir.), *Les formes contemporaines du populisme*, Montréal, Athéna, 2014 and also M.-Cl. Esposito et al (dir.), *Populismes. L’envers de la démocratie*, Paris, Vendémiaire, 2012.

23. A. Dieckhoff, in *La nation dans tous ses Etats. Les identités nationales en mouvement*, Paris, Flammarion, 2000.

24. See M. Funke, M. Schularick, C. Trebesch, *Going to Extremes: Politics after Financial Crisis 1870-2014*, Center for Economic Studies (CES)/IFO Institute 2015

25. H. Kriesi, E. Grande, R. Lachat, M. Dolezal, S. Nornschieer and T. Frey, *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008 and H. Kriesi, « The Populist Challenge », *West European Politics*, 37 (2), 2014.

26. Cf. D. Reynié, *Populismes : la pente fatale*, Plon, 2011.

27. Cf. P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Euroscepticism and Europhobia: the threat of populism

The rise of radical populist, eurosceptic and even europhobic trends, on the right and the left, highlights an economic and political crisis in European liberal democracy. The economic liberalism has not only been linked to an excess of neo-liberal reforms but also to the disaster of the financial crisis. The crisis in economic liberalism is reflected in a political crisis, a sufficiently clear symptom of which is the resurgence of populism and extremism in many European States. The basic principles of our regimes of freedom have to be revived and reasserted urgently, as the terrorist attacks in France have reminded us, since these have undermined the vital fundamentals of liberal democracy: the right to safety and security, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of thought etc ...

The strength of liberal democracy lies in being a regime that is naturally open to its own limits. Whilst we have had the feeling that regaining freedom was a powerful vehicle for national cohesion in the wake of terrorist attacks, many citizens feel the threat made to their individual freedom, notably their security. The feeling of many today in Europe is that it is an open space which goes unprotected and it is this fear that has to be answered. Given the crisis in democratic legitimacy this means fundamentally creating a common vision of the future of European integration: a community of citizens does not just live according to the law, the economy or regulation; it also, and especially lives according to a feeling of belonging to a political community as an area of choice. Given the economic crisis the proponents of an "open society" must acknowledge

that the quest for equality and solidarity (which led to socialism) comprise fundamental human requirements as shown by the success of the book by Thomas Piketty on inequalities [28] and are just as legitimate as are aspirations to freedom. Given the refugee crisis, the reception of people fleeing countries at war is a moral imperative and a fundamental right. Yet, at the same time, the quest for community and identity (which have led to nationalism) must equally be taken into account in a context of migratory crisis.

The history of the previous century shows that if these demands and aspirations expressed by the citizens are not taken into account, there is a danger of them being taken up by radical [29], anti-European forces. Given the malaise of many Europeans, a long term intellectual and political project is necessary for 21st century Europe if we want to prevent our societies from closing to the modern world. This project must be the reconstruction European political and economic model – reconciling freedom, solidarity, values that are the source of a common identity and international opening – in order to make it competitive in the world race of civilisation models as well as political and economic organisation.

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