Euroscepticism and Europhobia: the threat of populism

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.

EUROSCPESTICISM 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 parties 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 strongly (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 [11].

1. This text will be published in the next version of the Schuman Report on Europe. The next Schuman Report on Europe, 2014, Editions Logos de nouvelles (to be published in March 2016).
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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 nationalistic 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

17. A. Szczerbak, 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 disguise political reality or to that to the benefit of analyses of different type of resistance to European integration; see for example J. Lacors and R. Coman (dir.), Les résistances à l’Europe. Bruxelles, Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2007.
Denmark to Hungary, passing via France, the different national elections confirm the strength of the far right and populist parties that are diffusing protectionist 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 complete 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.

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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Thierry CHOPIN
is the head of research at the Robert Schuman Foundation.
Visiting Professor at the College of Europe (Bruges), he is associate expert at the Centre for International Research (CERI) of Sciences Po and visiting fellow at the European Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).