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A Return to the Future?

Europe in the present moment of crisis: Elements of a diagnosis and first orientations towards a therapy

Introduction

The present crisis of the EU institutions is to be distinguished from the financial crisis which has broken out globally in 2007 (cf. Altvater et al. 2009, Albo/Gindin/Panitch 2010, Altvater 2010). Accordingly, its roots go further back: Already the thematic expansion of the EU in the late 1980s which has brought the change-over from the old EEC (via the EC) to the EU was realized in ways equivalent to a tendency of de-politicization and ‘post-democratization’ (cf. Crouch 2004) of the internal processes of the EU. Procedures of common regulation have been exceedingly replaced by intergovernmental procedures of mere co-ordination which have displaced centres of power to the governments of powerful member states.

The global crisis of 2007 has served to highlight the structural lack of a political instance capable of a significant economic policy which could form a counter-weight to the monetary policy of the ECB, especially within the Euro-zone. And this lack cannot be fully compensated ‘nationally’, i.e. on a member state level – because the course of the crisis processes so far has made it clear that even Germany as the largest member state is not really capable of maintaining a successful management of these processes all on its own.

A crisis is ‘coming back’

In retrospect, it may be seen more clearly than it has appeared then to contemporaries: The global crisis of the 1970s which had been sidestepped and repressed since the 1980s is making itself felt again. The global problems (economic, ecological, social, international) which were internationally discussed then have remained without any real solution and, therefore, the defeated alternatives of those times (Chile 1973, Portugal 1974, France 1981, Nicaragua,) deserve closer consideration again. The themes of limits to growth, of global justice, and of peace and social integration have resurfaced again after two decades of oblivion. The slogan of TINA which had served to bring about the effective elimination of political choice from the political processes still admitted can be seen now as a repressive instrument for avoiding any serious meeting of these global challenges.

The price of the repressed structural crisis which has raised its head again in 2007 will certainly not be lowered by another round of strategies for avoiding addressing its structural roots. The contrary is far more probable: that this price will add up to a catastrophic size if addressing the structural problems underlying the crisis processes will be delayed any further. A present bifurcation, a point of possible path changes of the development of complex systems, is gradually emerging again since the breaking out of the global financial crisis in 2007. Comparing it to the last historical bifurcation, i.e. to that of the 1970s, will help us to understand its present potential – and thereby will be useful for making a difference today, making a way out more probable which will meet the real challenges, instead of retreating to the affirmative repetition of unenlightened interests and rigidified identities which help to ignore the challenges again – for some, limited, time.

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The repressed bifurcation of the 1970s has been followed by the imposition of a mono-linear political model of marketization, deregulation and privatization. This has been concretized in Europe in a neo-liberal hi-jacking of Europe: The crisis of the harmonization principle of the old EC in the 1970s had not been solved, but just side-stepped by switching to the country of origin principle, embedded in a process of the hayekianization of European integration: Creating a kind of ‚economic government‘ in the EU exempted from democratic accountability and bound to neoliberal principles of deregulation plus privatization. This has been successful for more than a decade, comparable to the USA: While the US were living a debt-financed boom period undermining its industrial capacity, the EU has managed to introduce its single market, create a common currency, and to bring about a big-bang enlargement, eliminating all possible alternative structures of European integration. Like in the US, however, it has become apparent that this EU expansion – in its political power, as well as in its geographical extension and macro-regional hegemony – has been based upon insecure foundations: The institutional counterparts for a stable common market had not been created in due time, the macro-political and financial complements for the common currency had been avoided, and the adhesion to the EU had not been accompanied by any viable perspective of economic development for the new member states. The ensuing descent of the neo-liberal EU into stagnation and crisis could not be stopped by the attempt to institute a European Constitution which would have made the principles of neoliberalism binding forever – as a ‚constitution to end history‘ – and the conclusion and, finally, ratification of the Lisbon Treaty as a ‚treaty to stop time‘.

This blockade will not go away spontaneously. It will have to be broken by alternative perspectives developed and imposed from below. Such a new beginning of a post-crisis politics will not be able to avoid the pitfalls of European institutional politics and just start from a clean slate of popular politics: It will have to reclaim the existing forms of European integration which have effectively, and deeply, transformed most of the European nation states into member states, creating a real, although still weak and mainly negative European dimension of practically all relevant political processes within the Union. This will be possible if politically explicit ways, which could only be following radically democratic patterns, should be found to make a productive use of the plurality of peoples in Europe and, at the same time, to unfold a cohesion policy worthy of its name – i.e. one which would overcome present polarization processes between classes and regions, with the effect of finding new ways of integrating the European polity.

Looking at Europe within the global constellation of crises which has not vanished due to the admittedly successful crisis management of globally leading states, among which China has played a role of growing importance, it becomes clearly visible that the successful neo-liberalization of the EU has been equivalent to a major European self-blockade – which should not be camouflaged by the continuing, but diminishing capacities to act in the global dimension by the former great powers. Their incapacities to act within the integrated forms of the EU or, at least, in common and concerted forms amount to self-imposed crises of a Europe which has developed in its neo-liberal phase as an elite project beyond the reach of nation state politics - and therefore, very far from constituting a Union of the peoples of its member states, and not at all adapted to be a democratic political vehicle of its multitudes.

The problem of the ‚state character‘ of the EU

Europe is not a state², very far from it. And it will not become a state in the foreseeable future. The European Union has managed to give a *de facto* answer to the question of the ‘political constitution’ of Europe which may not be definitive, but which will stay in place for a long time. Whether there will be a political entity in Europe which exhibits the characteristics of a state will be decided within the EU framework.³ The only open question which should not be overlooked is the perspective of embedding European forms of constituting a state in newly created global forms of constituting states – which are not realistically foreseeable. It is rather certain that there will be no reverting to purely national forms of being a state, as embodied in the nation states of the 19th century within Europe due to the state of European integration which has turned *de facto* irreversible.⁴

It is impossible to say today, what the definitive establishment of the EU⁵ as the definitive framework for any emerging European way of being a state will mean in the future – except that the political idea of a ‘United States of Europe’ has lost a great deal of its plausibility, given the capacity of the far looser EU structures to achieve most of what had been thought to be functions of a European state. The same holds true for the opposite political idea of a (renationalized) ‘Europe of fatherlands’ (de Gaulle): The EU in its actual practice presents a far higher degree of institutional and process related integration than it would be possible to achieve within a mere ‘bundle’ of nation states.

And yet it is clear that there is no way anymore to manage the member states and their societies without having recourse to a European level of politics. The EU, as it has emerged until now, presents an unavoidable challenge to real political practice in Europe: Within the EU as questions of how to use existing possibilities of participation in the most adequate and effective way⁶ and of how to achieve positions of power capable of influencing relevant decisions⁷, and in the remaining ‘pockets’ and ‘margins’ of Europe outside of the EU as the question of the concrete alternatives to EU adhesion⁸ viz. to a *de facto* integration into the EU, in a more or less subaltern position⁹.

² It should be explained to the Anglo-Saxon reader that the concept of a state, as it differs from the more general concept of a ‘political system’ refers to a political entity characterized by a relative autonomy from the society it shapes politically, and by being ‘sovereign’ with regard to other such entities as well as to underlying legal structures. And it should be added that this concept may not be substituted by the far less comprehensive and substantial concepts of ‘government’, ‘regime’ or ‘governance’.

³ Even if we would entertain the radical thought-experiment of a European constituent assembly with ‘revolutionary’ powers it would not be possible to refrain from referring to the present EU, even if it were only by way of negation.

⁴ It is evident that this does not exclude catastrophic developments – e.g. of the Euro-zone breaking apart and spawning ‘emergency currencies’ or of a re-fragmentation of the single market. Such catastrophic events would not lead, however, to an unblemished return of the old Europe of ‘national economic spaces’ – it would rather lead to far deeper destructions of the very fabric of the societies concerned. It would be excessively optimistic to assume, that this would not lead to politically chaotic situations of ‘social breakdown’.

⁵ Which is structured as a highly complex and unstable constellation, within which the areas of ‘integration’ have to be synchronized and re-synchronized indefinitely with merely ‘co-ordinated’ or simply ‘intergovernmental’ areas.

⁶ Politically strong groups dispose of possibilities of exerting decisive influence via electoral processes (presence in parliamentary bodies and in elected governments) and the election of office-holders via the capacity to impose candidates for specialized institutions and agencies – i.e. alongside their presence in the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament and the European Commission, by ‘manning’ the ECB or the EIB or the EBRD. This also holds true for an entire, complex ‘galaxy’ of complementary bodies (objects of the so-called EU ‘comitology’) active in concretizing, implementing and controlling European legislation.

⁷ The highly developed field of informal influence stretches from frequent ‘simple lobbyism’ in the legislation process via the funding of specifically oriented ‘think tanks’ of all kinds, up to rather effective meta-organizations like the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT), on the one hand, and to impressive street actions and manifestations of concerned citizens, on the other.

⁸ Since the ‘Big-Bang-Enlargement’ of 2004, which has brought the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta into the EU, completed

What the EU is

This present historical situation does not only pose multiple practical challenges for which adequate strategies are still lacking, it also poses an elementary challenge for theory, more specifically for conceptual elaboration and for advancing our understanding of the structural dynamics of such institutional developments and political processes. To put it in rather traditional philosophical terms, this theoretical challenge can be summed up in the question, *what the EU is*.

Even after decades of its existence official discourse and conformist theory converge in refusing the very question – by remaining on the superficial level of describing ‘systems’ and ‘flows’, or by adding to the traditional legal language about sovereign political entities, i.e. ‘states’, by introducing the new term of an entity ‘*sui generis*’, of its own kind¹⁰. Considering the EU as being just one more ‘level’ of the ‘political system’ either begs the question how far the EU may be characterized as a state, or it unduly privileges the characteristics of ‘negative integration’ in its still ‘deficient’ political processes (as e.g. in Scharpf 2009).

It would be difficult to deny that the EU institutions do possess a high degree of independence from social processes and democratic controversy within its member states – which has served to justify its characterization as a super-state. On closer inspection, however, it seems to be a theoretical mistake to overlook how far the undoubtedly strong forms of political integration the EU has found for its member states are still incomplete and fragile in comparison to classical nation states: The EU differs profoundly from such a modern state by not possessing any kind of ‘sovereign authority’, which is theoretically (and practically) capable of implementing and enforcing its decisions, whenever they deem it as essential for the reproduction of the entire entity. Instead, the EU is characterized by a constellation which could be conceived as a ‘selective and fragmented way of being a state’: Political processes and struggles tend to bring about unstable, partial and multi-level *equilibriums* of compromise which include explicit non-decisions and some degree of unresolved contradictions. This constellation goes beyond a mere co-ordination of sovereign states which tend to reserve all decisions of the last instance to themselves, but it has not achieved the degree of internal cohesion characteristic for a modern state. Politics may realistically include long-term postponements or pseudo-decisions without any real effect without damaging the credibility of the political processes. The array of political possibilities offering themselves to a relatively anonymous constellation of political agency operating beyond the reach of a still nationally defined political public is, therefore, far broader than in national state politics – especially by offering far more options for masking and accepting failure.

This should not contribute to the illusion that the EU is politically capable to do anything at any time. Quite to the contrary, it is true also for the EU that it is often simply impossible to implement the ideas underlying political discourses – although the EU has more possibilities for hiding such impossibilities by merely symbolic kinds of political practice, which may include the opening of limited fields of experimentation.

by the delayed adhesions of Romania and Bulgaria. At the present moment only Croatia and Iceland are candidates for an imminent membership, with Turkey, Serbia, Kosova and FYROM on a list of undeniable, but still problematic candidates.

⁹ The European Economic Area (EEA) offering the ‘comfort class’ of such arrangements, whereas the unilaterally imposed trade agreements with countries of the European Neighbourhood or the African-Caribbean-Pacific agreements constitute the ‘simple class’ without any ‘frills’.

¹⁰ This *ad hoc* concept is central for the jurisdiction the German Court of the Constitution (Bundesverfassungsgericht) has developed on questions of EU integration.

The development of political integration within the EU is highly unequal. On the one hand, there are EU institutions which have been granted an autonomy with regard to member states and their societies to a degree which seems historically unique – like the ECB which is not bound to loyalty towards a EU government, as national central banks usually are to their respective government – simply because such a EU government does not exist. The Council of Ministers (and the European Council) with their secret meeting as a dominant factor in all EU legislation are extremely atypical in modern states, too: In English history it may only be compared to the ‘star chamber’ of James I before the Revolution. On the other hand, especially the larger member states seem to have reserved a kind of implicit political veto power for their national politics even on the EU level, whenever they do not think it preferable to use European decision making as a lever to outmanoeuvre national politics and democratic accountability.

The political instability and plurality of present EU politics is continuously re-translated into really existing geographical difference and asynchronicity – with the effective result that this is not being reduced by EU integration processes: An ever deepening competition of regions¹¹ (or municipalities) – which most member states have very small chances of regulating – leads to a growing polarization in economic and social development. This opens the possibility of compromise building by granting a plurality of national problem solutions to be tested by open competition¹² – especially in areas which are more distant from core economic decisions – which tends to reinforce existing fault lines and hierarchies between the societies of member states. This includes an overarching tendency imposing the political options of an implicit coalition of ruling elites – which are often as linked to global networks than to their national political base – but it does not exclude the possibilities of developing more egalitarian political policies – and to translate them into demands in other national contexts which may also bring about a ‘convergence from below’ – as in the references to the Scandinavian model of social policy which are increasingly present in other member states.

What the EU has in common with modern nation states

The idea that the EU is developing into being a state is not entirely without foundation – although it remains basically erroneous. Because even though it does neither possess nor tends to develop anything like ‘sovereign authority’, two groups of characteristics deserve special consideration which the EU shares with the modern nation state: Its relative autonomy in relation to democratic deliberation and to relations of force within member states’ societies, and its class characteristics.

(1) *Autonomous power of the EU institutions*: The EU as a regime of economic regulation explicitly extending into all relevant dimension of the reproduction of modern bourgeois societies on the basis of the accumulation of capital exhibits strong characteristics of autonomy with regard to the actual practice of human agents in its area of effective impact. This kind of autonomy is comparable to that of the modern state by going clearly beyond the particular commitments incurred by these subjective agents themselves. As it has been expressed – imperfectly and not without ensuing paradoxes – within modern political philosophy by the notion of a ‘social contract’, creating such a sovereign authority: Their obligation to obey state authority is supposed to go beyond all particular promises or contracts

¹¹ As the very notion of a ‘political region’ has remained without a common European definition, remaining under the spell of diverging national definitions, it is no surprise that the EU’s ‘Committee of Regions’ has been unable to find a relevant political role in the power-play of EU institutions.

¹² It is important to see here, that this is not a competition between goods (and services) but a competition between kinds of regulation and underlying ‘political cultures’.

the 'subjects' have concluded, and even beyond all agreed and 'constituted' procedures of deliberation and decision making they have given their consent. This obligation, therefore, amounts to subjecting themselves to being dominated by a power beyond them, which cannot be – without insurmountable difficulties – traced back to their own doings. And it does not only overrule their own spontaneous wishes, needs or wills in claiming obedience, it includes the capacity of realising their subjection by force.

It is certainly not a kind of people's sovereignty which is constitutive for the political power of the EU. Nor is it easy to determine the sources of power underlying decision making processes in the EU which could be submitted to demands of democratic accountability: The Council of Ministers (together with the 'European Council' of heads of states and governments) is certainly one of the centres of power within the EU; the secrecy surrounding its workings (not just the official meetings, but also their preparation process and the roles of the relatively small group of national civil servants operating its complex deliberation processes make them difficult to grasp and certainly intransparent. The same is even truer for the broad 'grey area' of European 'comitology'. The European Parliament has been almost continuously granted new rights of participating in the EU's legislative process, which do now amount to a right of co-decision, i.e. of veto, in important areas. Yet it mainly remains trapped between the exclusive right of initiative of the EU Commission and the de facto exercised right of decision in the last instance in the hands of the Council (and the 'apolitical' norm imposition within European 'comitology'). How far it is still struggling for real influence on the course of European affairs, is exemplified by the existence of the so-called 'trilogue': Based on an 'interinstitutional agreement' – another unique feature of the EU as a political body – representatives from all three institutions directly involved in European legislation – the Parliament, the Council, and the Commission – come together in order to sort out their difficulties and formulate elements of a common accord without going through any more political deliberation, thereby defining the key elements relevant for all further deliberation processes.

(2) The globalist and 'entrepreneurial' class features of the EU: The EU, due to its focus on economic structures, as they are developing and reproducing themselves under the domination of the capitalist mode of production, has systematically exhibited class features in its institutions and processes which differentiate between a dominating and a dominated class (or groupings of classes) and which contribute to the clearly profiled reproduction of such class divisions.¹³ This is patent in all of its operations and yet it remains almost invisible. This paradox may be understood by articulating its underlying logic, as it has been visible in the processes of emergence of the EU out of their predecessor organizations, the EEC, Euratom and the ECCS: They had already shared an effectively neo-mercantilist perspective geared to gaining precedence in exports, in which different class interests are seen as diluting in a common 'national interest'. By explicitly giving absolute primacy to the aims of economic growth and 'competitiveness' on the world markets, the EU had then implicitly laid down the primacy of entrepreneurial private business interests. And by then binding its own strategies of economic integration – as in the case of the 'Lisbon strategy' agreed in 2000 to the role of private business as a 'global player', it adds a special focus on the more limited group of private corporations with a global reach. This introduces a further aggravation of the class features of the EU, pushing even the interests of private corporations limited to national or European markets to a secondary place.

This institutionalized bias of the EU in favour of the European economic 'global players' finds an adequate expression in the patent willingness of EU institutions for listening to strategic proposals coming from these class fractions and their organizations – ranging from

¹³ It should be underlined here that we do not talk about social stratography, but of structural relations of domination and unequal power.

the *European Round Table of Industrialists* (ERT) via the 'Bilderberg group' to various global meetings and think-tanks of this group of 'leading entrepreneurs'. This asymmetry is also found in the proportions existing in organized lobbyism: 6000 industrial lobbyists, most of them again from 'global players' outnumber by far e.g. the almost 100 collaborators of the *European Trade Union Council* (ETUC), the almost 50 from social organizations or the 20 of the *European Environmental Bureau* (EEB) active in Brussels.¹⁴

This far reaching institutionalized bias of the EU which leads to a systematic orientation by the strategic demands and proposals (to the point of copying them *verbatim*) of the interest organizations of private business enterprise, especially on the side of the Commission as the privileged initiator of legislative. This is not subject to revision and correction by a European public – which does not exist – or by the EP which is, in its majority, strongly influenced by the same processes of unilateral lobbying and unable to counter the pretended expertise of entrepreneurs' lobby organizations, nation state officials, and a closely knit network of academic experts linked to these interest perspectives on this trans-national level of politics. . Without being able to rely on 'counter-expertise' coming from social movements (or of 'whistle-blowers' from the structures of power and the sources of dominant expertise) the EP's control over the legislative process would be far weaker, even in areas in which it is earnestly trying to exert it.

After the neo-liberal 'take-over' of European integration within the EU

Today's EU is no more the Europe of the 'founding fathers' of European integration. Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schumann and Alcide de Gasperi were conservative politicians who had resisted the lure of fascism, but struggled successfully against any left-leaning way out of the post-war crisis. Their European project was supposed to give an additional European dimension to their national political projects which were a conservative variant of the 'fordist' class compromise ushered in by the New Deal in the US – with the additional function of keeping the West German state solidly within the Western alliance and preventing any renewal of German power politics. And the kind of European integration they have effectively created – first the ECCS which has helped to restart and to modernize European industry in a strategic sector (also for purposes of rebuilding military power), then the EEC which was supposed to prevent any return to policies of economic autarchy among its six founding members, and 'Euratom' which aimed at putting the energy source of the future into the hands of member states without endangering the nuclear oligopoly of the still 'great powers', was clearly distinct from the antimilitary and antifascist Europe delineated in the visions of resistance movements during Nazi occupation which had become an important fuel for European hopes during the post-war era. It is true that the Europe which came into being according to the Monnet method – small steps to create the need for further steps – was based on historical class compromises, but these continued to be national rather than continental.en Ausmaßen. It has not been a mere insignificant accident that ECCS and EEC have been conceived and implemented after a first attempt to give a European framework to the rearmament of Germany had failed: As a specifically European kind of implementation of the

¹⁴ These strong class features of the EU institutions and processes is in no way diminished by the systematic 'integration' of trade unions or of social initiatives and networks – even after the stronger forms of an explicit 'corporatism' characteristic for the now defunct ECCS have been abolished: The reduced political weight of European trade unions within the EU is strikingly illuminated by the fate of the 'social dialogue' instituted by the European Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) – which has been openly dropped by the business organizations. Instead European corporations demand to be consulted officially within all relevant European legislation.

US led 'cold war', the European Defence Community (EDC)¹⁵ had failed because of unsolved problems within the French polity, leaving now only the issues of modernizing the economies of Western Europe as a task to be addressed by a new project of European integration. The first phase of this kind of European integration, from 1957 to the blockade by de Gaulle in the 1970s has been geared towards helping to fulfil the imperatives of a Keynesian economic policy in the member states as well as the requirements of its corporatist social complements. Both have been modulated in very different ways within different member states – in shades reaching from the 'liberal radical' statism of the IVth Republic in France, via the Christian democratic and ordo-liberal authoritarian notions dominant in Germany and in Italy to the more strongly pluralist consensus oriented democracies of the Benelux countries. They all have converged in assigning a secondary role to the politics of European integration: Besides the officially declared aim of finally and definitely securing peace, especially between Germany and France – which has been an easy task within one and the same military block in a war, even if it was 'only a cold one' – to prevent economic exchanges between the member states from becoming a factor of disturbance and to make sure that 'trade wars' and policies of 'autarchy' ceased to be a viable option. This has been crucially important in the 1950s and 1960s for a (Western) Europe linked to the USA, but it has, first, lost a lot of its political urgency, when the straitjacket of cold war confrontation became less binding with the very first steps of détente, and, second, when the spectacular success of economic reconstruction on 'fordist' moulds began to fade and the (Western) European economies returned to the normalcy of a capitalist industrial cycle, i.e. with the recession of the mid-1960s. A long and protracted groping for new orientations of the Western European political project ensued, apparently opening into a period of stagnation in the 1970s. Only in the 1980s a new orientation has finally emerged which has then prevailed: The protagonists of a neoliberal turn of politics in the 'Western world' have succeeded in redefining the project of society underlying European integration. And this turn has, indeed, managed to end the blockade of the preceding kind of European politics.

Instead of the technocratic method of Jean Monnet to proceed by small steps, creating ever more situations of constraint which could push political deliberation into a certain direction, without, however, making political decision making totally superfluous, the protagonists of a neo-liberal turn of European integration have installed a radically new mechanism which could function without any political deliberation: the mechanism of market competition as a silent decision making mechanism applied to rules, standards and regulations. This mechanism had been conceived by Friedrich August von Hayek in the 1930s – as an alternative to the political class compromises then conquering Western societies¹⁶, as well as to the more radical kinds of 'statism' characteristic of state socialism (and to the 'statist' elements of fascist rule¹⁷): By postulating a definition of the basic legal framework for economic activity beyond the limits of the nation state and, therefore, as it were, out of bounds of democratic decision making economic policy is systematically reduced to being defined by an 'economic rationality' absent from 'national particularities' or 'popular sentiments'. This idea has been creatively applied to the European integration process by the replacement of the principle of admitting European 'harmonization' only as 'improvement' on

¹⁵ Continued, as it were, in a diluted form by the Western European Union (WEU)..

¹⁶ The US 'New Deal' was not unique in this respect, in parallel France and Spain experimented with class compromises of a 'popular front' type, and Sweden turned to create the 'people's home' – whereas the Latin American (Vargas in Brazil) or Asian (Chiang Kai-Tchek in China) counterparts were far more ambivalent.

¹⁷ It should not be overlooked that the fascist regimes, including their Nazi variant, were not thoroughly statist, but rather corporatist, with a very strong role played by private business enterprise – which has been rewarded by extraordinary possibilities for capital accumulation for playing along with fascist military 'expansion'.

existing national rules and regulations by the ‚principle of the country’ of origin, which would admit any kind of rules and regulations existing in some member states to a process of ‚rule competition’ on a European scale: No member state may hinder the access to its markets, when a product (or a service) conforms to the regulation of its country of origin. This new principle has reinforced and often precipitated the asymmetry existing in the EU institutions between opening market access which can be brought about by majority decision, and the introduction of regulation for these very markets which can only be achieved by unanimous vote.¹⁸ This principle of organizing economic competition on deregulated markets itself as an apolitical mechanism of selecting the ‚most adequate’ ways of regulating the economic process has been systematically extended to all dimensions and levels of policy within the EU – to the rather extreme point of giving precedence to the ‚market liberties’ of private business enterprise over individual human and citizens’ rights in the recent legislation of the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. This had the foreseeable effects of creating a climate of noxious tax competition on the one hand, and of a socially polarizing social dumping, while remaining, in spite of expectations to the contrary, durably unable to create the conditions for a new dynamics of capital accumulation in real terms. Instead, deregulated financial markets have systematically built new possibilities for accumulating money which could function as capital for a limited time, before having to be translated in real investment and real exploitation. As the experience of the ‚Clinton years’ has shown, this could go on for more than a decade.¹⁹

In this way, the Hayekian way out of the crisis of fordist class compromises has imposed in most Western nation states, instead of the politics of ‚authoritarian statism’ the rise of which had been expected by many as a response to this structural crisis of capitalist accumulation.²⁰ Generally speaking Hayekian trans-nationalism functions by using the arguments of the dictates of ‚globalization’ in order to limit the impact of democratic debate on economic policy, while using the minimum regulation typical of the new WTO regime (created after the end of the old GATT) in order to submit the trade policies of states to the basic requirements of market opening, while maintaining a seeming of democratic politics within the nation states.²¹ The same institutional logic has been transferred to the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF and World Bank) which have been transformed to make them functional for the new world order – as watchdog and small incentive giver discouraging all attempts by nation states to implement policies going against the new grain of deregulation, privatization and financierization. Even mere consultative organizations like the OECD have been put to new uses in the service of the new, neo-liberal paradigm.

The EU – after its neo-liberal turn - has managed to go one decisive step further: It has made the principle of deregulation itself into a mechanism which is being institutionally guaranteed and actively pursued by political agency, without leaving any political space for significant

¹⁸ This is the core element of the precedence for ‚negative integration’ within EU politics as diagnosed by Fritz Scharpf (2009).

¹⁹ Robert Brenner has clearly articulated these mechanisms of delaying a deep crisis of capital accumulation by credit expansion and financierization.

²⁰ This argument has been most convincingly elaborated by Nicos Poulantzas (1978) in his analysis of ‚authoritarian statism’.

²¹ According to the definition of ‚modern politics’ as publicly given by commissioner Martin Bangemann: as an easier and more malleable alternative to democratic legislation which had become unfeasible because of its slowness and simplification tendency in the face of the acceleration and complexity of technological development: A clear definition of aims and objectives by legally binding international conventions, to be implemented by a body of experts having the monopoly of interpretation and the capacity to impose sanctions.. Bangemann’s own example has been the WTO. It is important to see, however, that also other structures of the new ‚global governance’ built up since the 1980s, and most significantly the EU itself, in its neo-liberal phase have been moulded according to this definition – thereby implementing the hayekian programme of exempting economic decision making from democratic politics.

opposition against this kind of ‚economic rationality’ imposed by automatic mechanisms not bound in any way to explicit and direct political orientations.

The key idea of this neo-liberal turn of the EU has been to avoid open political conflicts by de-politicizing a process of radical transformation. Instead of seeking majorities for implementing neo-liberal strategies they were presented as objective necessities. Therefore it has been possible in their implementation to avoid using the direct repressive powers of nation states – as in the Southern European dictatorships or as in the early years of Maggie Thatcher, when she had to rely on police violence to bring the striking miners back under control – class compromises were annulled and social conquests by the working class have been undermined or recalled, simply by exposing them to a highly selective dumping competition. At the same time, this strategy of negatively and indirectly using state power to change the relation of forces served effectively to weaken trade union organizations of the working class within the EU as well as left wing political organizations. This strategy could take up again a central idea of Hayek’s: The notion of a European Federation which would imperatively impose the main lines of their economic and social policies on member states’ governments – and thereby blocking the very possibility of ceding to democratic pressures from within and from below, built up by multitudes at the base of their societies, which could eventually cause national governments to accept what would seem to be irrational compromises from a neo-liberal point of view (cf. Gowan 2005, 9). One of the intellectual pioneers of this new strategy, Tommaso Padoa Schioppa (1987) has, accordingly, talked in this respect about „the rise of a political philosophy on the basis of the idea of ‚minimal government““which has been „imposed within the EC by a combination of minimalized harmonization with the principle of mutual recognition” and which has been crucial for „removing the impediments for a complete realization of the single market“.

I would be a mistake, however, to assume that the real potential for unfetter the dynamics of the single market (and of the common currency) were located on the general European level or in the relations of exchange of the Europe of the EU with the rest of the world. It has been, quite to the contrary, very clearly located within the member states – in the internal structures of compromise and domination which could be transformed by being exposed to the silent constraints of deregulated competition, which was being presented as ‘without any alternative’. This strategy has succeeded in taking away from the member states what Hayek (1939) had declared to be the central problem: “their unlimited sovereignty in the sphere of the economy”.

The European detour built into the strategy has made it possible to achieve results which would have been impossible within the member states alone, where such a strategy would have been defeated by democratic majorities to be activated against it. And yet it has to be considered an open historical question, how far Hayek’s notion of a „power with the capability to hold back the different nations“, based „upon a set of rules which lay down what a state may do and what it may not do”, and bolstered by „an authority which is in the position to be able to impose these rules” (Hayek 1939) will really be capable of durably undoing the kind of democratic ‘embedding’ (Polanyi 1944) and, therefore, binding’ of capitalist accumulation which had been achieved in the European post-war and fordist era. In any case, it can already be seen from experience with the second, neo-liberal phase of European integration which has started in the 1980s and has been first consolidated by the Single European Act (SEA) in 1987 has already shown two points: *First*, that the simple unfettering of dumping competition on all levels has an important potential for transforming social relations of exchange and of co-operation: the effects of the single market and of the common currency have made an important and clearly visible impact on the economies and societies of the member states since then – in the forms of a European modulation of ‚global sourcing’ of corporations and groups and of a growing pressure of tax competition on the systems of taxation and social contributions systems within the member states, thereby

narrowing the possibilities for state intervention in general and the scope of social security more especially. The big bang enlargement of 2004 has even more rapidly transformed Eastern European societies, privatization, deregulation and financierization have polarized them and made it impossible for the respective states to do anything significant about it. And, *second*, that the ideology of an 'objective constraints' or of a 'monolinear rationality' linked to it ('there is no alternative' – TINA –, or in bad German: *basta!*) has ever and again met significant resistance, but could so far always be renewed as hegemonic ideology – even after a clearly articulated No to the reigning policies. As, for instance, when the December strikes of 1996 had created the possibility for a new political alternative in France which has then been grasped by the Jospin government, but the EU mechanisms of constraints have managed to bring it back into line with the neo-liberal agenda, within a few years. Since the 1980s the EEC and the ECCS have been transformed in this way into the EC, and finally into the EU – thereby creating an institutional setting for neo-liberal hegemony in Europe which has led to the success story of the neo-liberal phase of European integration which has seen the implementation of the 'single market', the introduction of the Euro as the common currency of most member states, and the big-bang enlargement of 2004, as the concluding event so far.

Under different lenses, Guglielmo Carchedi (2001), Peter Gowan (1999) and Yves Saesle (1997) have described the transformation processes in some detail, by which the European Union has been restructured to become a privileged space for imposing the neo-liberal way out of the crisis of Fordism – by 'unfettering' capital accumulation from the constraints resulting from the class compromises concluded in within the European nation states in the age of the 'welfare state'. That this Hayekian kind of 'economic government' has also created a new model of economic integration for the EU, using the traditional 'prerogative' of governments in 'foreign policy' for withdrawing substantial political issues from the arenas of member states' politics.

Such an analysis at first sight seems to justify democratic reluctance to accept the European level of politics as a given – because its main result in the last two decades has been reshaping European integration in such a way, that neo-liberal hegemony seemed to be structurally guaranteed even in the long run. Even after the failure of the attempt to inscribe this hegemony into a 'European Constitution' and even in the midst of a global crisis constellation, it still seems basically unshaken.

Since the EU has been 'hi-jacked' by neo-liberal strategies, it is no more simply acting as an 'amplifier' of neo-liberal globalization (Streeck 1995), but as a privileged strategic lever for pushing neo-liberal transformations far beyond the limits of the reach of mere 'globalization'. *On the one hand*, in international terms, the neo-liberal regime of the EU has effectively hindered its member states to step out of the role of subaltern accomplices – in rather different specific roles, from being part of the Wall street complex (Great Britain) via being a regional support of neo-colonial strategies (France) to being a necessary partner in global regulation agreements (Germany). *On the other hand*, internally, it is actively preventing that any democratic initiatives may emerge within the member states which may in any way endanger the growing market radical orientation of the economic and social policy within the EU. Already in the beginning of the 1980s these EU mechanisms have been rather effective against the alternative notions of society contained in the policies of the French Left Union; in the midst of the 1990s the 'new departure' of a 'plural left', also spreading from France, has been even more effectively deviated by these mechanisms of the EU, as they had been perfected in the meantime, serving as a privileged space for the main features of the neo-liberal transformation, i.e. for privatization, deregulation, and financierization.

Up to the present day, these EU mechanisms function as an important factor to prevent member states to rebuild effective forms of national regulation of their economies and thereby weaken the democratic capability to act of the peoples of the union, in the narrower as well as

in the broader sense of citizenship. In this way they systematically create difficulties for all attempts at regulating more on the European level than the minimum required for maintaining the functionality of markets. For instance, the European services directive, originally known (under the name of the Commissioner who had initiated it) as ‚Bolkestein-directive‘ takes up the principle of applying the regulation of the ‚country of origin‘ and applies it to the execution of services – simply by defining the legal seat of the responsible firm as the ‚country of origin‘ in this sense (cf. Bsirske et al. 2006). This has practically carried deregulation effectively into further areas which had remained strongly regulated and protected against international, inter-regional or even inter-local competition, especially in small and medium sized enterprises (which officially rank so very high in the concerns of the EU, as well as in local forms of public service.²²

Is there a role to be taken by the EU within future processes of transformation?

Jürgen Habermas (2004) is simply right when he argues that the EU will have to play an important role in coping with the global constellation of crises which has become more clearly visible in the last years, after having been almost relegated to oblivion by the ‚exuberance‘ of the ‚Clinton years‘. Humankind has become an objective agency with a geo-historical impact (cf. Schellnhuber 1999; Crutzen 2002; Rockström et al. 2009; Schellnhuber et al. 2005), but it is still far from a significant capability of acting as a political subject. This means concretely, that macro-regional powers will have to act in concert to meet the major challenges confronting humankind today. In Europe the EU has become²³ and still is – together with the complementing structures and networks it has built²⁴ – the most likely and the most acceptable counterpart (the only halfway realistic alternative to it would be the hegemony of one of the leading nation states, most probably of Germany, with all the historical baggage and present contradictions implied by such a construction of hierarchy between supposedly sovereign states). This does not mean that the views of those Eurosceptics can be lightly discarded who insist that this EU as it has been shaped over the last decades is not especially apt, in its existing structure, for acting effectively in the pursuit of such aims. It is not even really open for creating the needed spaces which would allow others to build the capability of addressing these tasks, by their initiatives and struggles. Yet it is to be granted, too, that it is very difficult even to imagine sustainable answers to these challenges in Europe without relying upon the present state of European integration, the undoing of which will be a regression which would make real solutions even more difficult. The only reason for hope is the impossibility to calculate in advance which opportunities and real possibilities for another historical turn of EU development will present themselves in the future. The process of history is less foreseeable – so that such possibilities can only identified

²² Without giving up the specifically ‚European‘ principle of fragmented compromising – which allows for exceptions in cases of very strong resistances.

²³ Until the structural historical break of 1989 it would still have been possible to consider other constellations, by which groups of countries outside of the EU would have started integration processes of their own in different ways, which would have made it easier to change the orientation underlying EU integration.

²⁴ As e.g. in the close-knit and regular cooperation with ‚its own‘ chosen ‚candidate‘ countries, the countries of the European Economic Space, the countries addressed by the ‚European Neighbourhood Policy‘ (with a Northern (Arctic), Eastern (Eastern Europe without Russia) and a Southern (Mediterranean) dimension, or in the structured co-operation on the basis of multilateral treaties with former colonies of EU member states in the framework of the ACP.. The only exception in this respect can be seen in the Aarhus process concerning ‚environmental policies‘ in a narrow sense, especially with ‚natural reserves‘, as it is carried by the *Economic Committee for Europe* (ECE).

and grasped from within – as Hardt und Negri (2010, 126ff.) have formulated this principle in a somewhat ‘heightened’ fashion – in a ‘strategic inquiry’ combining understanding and agency.

It is important to understand that the diagnosis of the state of the EU, as Habermas has invoked it in his pleading for an alternative in European politics, urgently needs an important clarification: Because the kind of an elite project which the EU is, has changed deeply and decisively since the times of the EEC and ECES. Whereas the EEC contract of 1957 had instituted a rather marginal addition to the fordist policies of its member states which delegated the question of a future dynamic of integration to the unknown future of European exchanges, the new phase of European integration since the 1980s had been bent upon actively bringing about the dynamics of future European exchange: more and more by effectively unfettering the forces of capitalist competition from the restraints imposed by the compromise structures of European Fordism, by strategically exploding key structures and mechanisms of these historical compromises. The idea – in a way exemplified by the figure of Alexandre Kojève who became one of those ‘eurocrats’ – of an additional substantial rationality (exemplified by the industrial and scientific experts of EURATOM and implemented by European civil servants in small steps leading to further constraints requiring ever more steps of positive European integration, but supporting the national class compromises of Fordism) which had ceased to function in the 1980s, has been replaced by the notion of a bundle of procedures functioning objectively to set free the effects of unfettered global competition which was seen now, following Hayek’s views, as the only possible source of rationality. Experts basing their advice on neo-classical economic models of radical marketization do not offer substantial problem solutions any more – they rather propose procedures and mechanisms to overcome the supposed irrationality of all explicit political decisions by introducing automatic optimization processes based on unfettered competition. It is to be granted that the EU has succeeded – at least for a considerable time-span – to offer a way of coping with the contradictions implicit in the very process of the accumulation of capital by developing in this way – especially by combining a limited protection against external competition (based on the VAT system of taxation, not on tariffs), with an opening of markets within and without and with a significant potential of low wages, taxes and social contributions brought about by dumping competition in these fields. This has been the secret of its impressive record since the late 1980s.

Left Perspectives

The left should find two opposing features of the present EU especially interesting: On the one hand, the EU may be considered to constitute the most advanced constitutional model which the neo liberal counter-revolution has been capable of producing. Fighting against it and de-constructing its operative mechanisms very clearly is a deserving task. On the other hand, it seems to be effectively clear now, that the relative defeat of the European ‘elites’ in their attempt to make the Hayekian kind of economic government an irreversible element of a EU constitution has made it clearly visible that the potential of this model is basically exhausted, or at least very close to the limits of its political capability: The principle of commodifying ever more ‘goods and services’ which is fundamental to the single market is encountering real and significant resistances – not anymore only under ecological and feminist criteria, but under broader criteria of ‘happiness’ or ‘quality of life’. Likewise, the real processes of failure of the notion of an ‘a-political’ currency or of a ‘self-regulating’ financial market have made it visible that the EU is embedded in a broader constellation of structural crises which will not find an adequate answer within neo-liberal politics (including its more recent authoritarian variants).

It may even be argued that this shows the EU – due to its present inaction as a result of institutional blockades – is gliding ever more deeply into the present global constellation of crises brought about by the capitalist mode of production. As on the global level in which it is becoming ever more evident that it simply cannot go on any more as it has been going on during the last decades, and that radical alternatives are to be considered, the EU level offers growing evidence for the need for deep and structural change.

This has to be grasped as a historical opportunity – which has to be fully understood as a first step to grasping it – by presenting proposals not just for an alternative constitution of the EU, but for alternative political processes, made possible by new political constellations and procedures in key areas, like economic, social, and financial policy.

Inaction cannot be an option for the left in Europe – because, simultaneously, rather different kinds of renewal of European politics are beginning to take shape from other sides: Increasing military power, practising military interventions and using repressive powers are imagined to open up new spaces for European political action. These approaches, however, are far from solving the paradoxes of European integration between marketization and the creation of a ‘super-state’: instead they will tend to exacerbate it, creating ever more areas of potential conflicts between European and nation state politics. This may help alternative forces to push back their further deployment.

In other words, what is at stake is exactly finding a reply to the question of how to build a politically capable and emancipatory capacity to act on and for the European level of politics. In sober consideration this is a question without a clear-cut, well experimented and reliable answer even with regard to classical nation states – like the US – which do play a leading role within the global constellation of powers which has been conceptualized in ‘world system’ research (cf. Wallerstein 1974, 1980 u. 1989).

This may help to conceive the rather courageous idea with regard to the EU that the special challenges of European politics – in which traditional divisions between ‘interior’ and ‘foreign’ policy or between the issue of peace and the political issues under deliberation within the nation states have been blurred to the point of no return – will reinforce the requirement of parting with all temptations of ‘nationalist’ or ‘imperial’ policies which have seriously hampered emancipatory politics throughout the 20th century. Addressing the needs for and the requirements of the European level of politics will, therefore, present an extra chance for the idea of a radical renewal of the politics of liberation. The demand of ‘producing French’ by which the French communists have propagated nationalism from the left, cannot easily be translated to the European level of politics. And the re-combination of existing elements in the framework of European politics – equalization across borders, legal guarantees and social security for migrants, as well as a legally defined framework of rights and obligations constitutive of specific markets and other exchanges – do offer a rewarding point of departure for innovative debates for trans-national notions of regulation: These do not only give us new possibilities of conceiving of processes of the socialization of markets within the EU; they also produce models and paradigms for trans-national regulation in other parts of the globe – and even could be translated (with the needed concentration on crucial and solvable problems) on problem solving on a global scale.

It will not be easy, but it can be done: A first step towards another strategic change would be a converging debate on substantial issues of problem solutions for the main challenges of the present constellation of crises: mass unemployment, regional pauperization, climate degradation and shrinking biodiversity, alongside with tendencies of reaffirming gender and ethnic or racist discrimination. Addressing these issues and elaborating common and converging European solutions would help to move the focus of European politics away from capital accumulation (i.e. economic growth and financial stability) towards central challenges on the way towards an eco-social conversion of European societies. Whenever such a debate

will lead to specific political demands, it will be fiercely opposed by the powers still in place on the European level. These resistances may only be overcome by activating new forces, i.e. by bringing the democratic processes within the member states and the multitudes underlying them into the European power play. Such a way of renewing European politics by making it the object of far broader struggles can make use of substantial as well as activating elements which do already exist within European civil society, although they are still rather marginal: This is true for the elaborate results produced by expertise networks of social movements which have begun to develop on a trans-national European level – from the ‘European Appeal for Full Employment’ in the 1990s via the ‘Green 8’, later on ‘Green 10’ and the *European Social Platform* respectively the umbrella organization of European antiracist groups (UNITED), of European development NGOs or of the European *International Anti-Poverty Network* (IAPN) and the *European Women’s Lobby*, who all have presented realistic proposals for alternative political projects and programmes in their respective fields which may be realized with existing or available instruments of the EU institutions and procedures, and these proposals have been concretized and actualized continuously over the last decade. It is also true for synthesizing memoranda based on alternative expertise, like the Euro-Memorandum presented annually by a European network of critical economists, the EuroMemo Group since 1998, for the field of social policy by a group of experts co-operating closely with the ETUC (Bercusson / Mückenberger et al. 1996, Mückenberger 2001), in the field of gender politics (cf. Schunter-Kleemann 1992; Wöhl 2007), or for the field of environmental politics by the official network of the existing consulting bodies (EACE).²⁵ It is patently clear from this collected expertise that an alternative set of policies would be realistically possible on the level of European politics and even within the framework of the EU, if only the structural political impediments were overcome which the present de facto constitution of the EU opposes to anything politically limiting the prospects of an unfettered accumulation of capital. It is just a question of ‘mustering the political will’ to do so. The lack of political will the EU opposes to alternative policies which would address the root causes of the present constellation of crises is not simply a contingent fact which may easily be changed. On the contrary, there are good grounds for maintaining that an opposing ‘negative will’ is at present deeply inscribed into the very structures of EU institutions and procedures, supported by the relations of power between the member states. This is often masked by a hypocrisy of ‘good will’ typical of the EU which serves the function of making the underlying, deeply anchored negative will almost invisible. In this respect, especially the most powerful member states (like Germany) are very much part of the problem: Adding to the negative will of the neo-liberal mould of EU politics against anything which may possibly put limitations on the ‘market freedoms’ of capital, they dispose of important possibilities of stopping European projects they do not agree to. This does not even require that they explicitly take a negative stance. Just by transferring and concentrating the scarce resources disposable on the EU levels for advancing such a political project – not just money, also deliberation time, expertise to be generated or public awareness – on other projects more to their liking. Therefore it is a key task of overcoming the present situation of an insurmountable negative political will against all alternative policies to make this destructive behaviour of leading member states visible – especially to their own national political deliberation processes – and to correct it democratically, from below. Otherwise it is to be feared that even the best and most well-argued alternative policy proposals will be blocked from implementation.

²⁵ The existing projections for a long term future of the EU offer food for discussion also for debates on alternative European politics and policies.

The needed recombination of politics within the member states with a new start of European politics will not simply happen spontaneously. Nor will it be brought about by a systematic process of organizing and propaganda. Under the presupposition of a political new beginning taking shape transnationally in the face of the challenges of an ever more acutely pressing constellation of crises – not only, but also in Europe – it seems possible to anticipate new occasions for political initiative which may be grasped by emerging alternative social and political forces. The European Social Forums have so far successfully functioned as arenas for trans-national networking and alliance building. It will be required to take a next step by defining common European projects and creating alliances for a political agency combining interventions on member states' and European level and geared to break through the status quo of habitual structures within the member states as well as the subtly constituted blockade against alternative political strategies operating on the European level.

Three kinds of way out

The task of overcoming the present institutional blockade of the EU – which amounts to a crisis in the face of the challenges arising from economic and social crisis processes – can be, in principle, approached in three radically different ways:

- One radical approach would be a serious attempt to create a sovereign authority within the EU²⁶, i.e. a competency of the last instance capable of settling all disputes about competency, thereby creating a clear hierarchy of competences between the EU institutions and those of the member states. This would effectively create a federated state in Europe, capable of putting an end to all the problems alluded to – and clearly answer the question what the EU is: the united (even if federated) states of Europe. Such a sovereign authority would be capable to decide (and to make its decisions binding in actual practice) which framework regulations, which minimum standards and which kinds of protection of rights are indispensable – and to define the leeway which could be given to the member states for shaping their own regulation regimes while obeying these EU injunctions, and even granting them reserved areas of legislation and politics protected from intervention by the federated state. This would then reduce the problems of European politics to the ordinary, well-known challenges of democratic policy making and implementation. And the tasks of democratization or of ecological plus social conversion within the EU would not differ any more radically from those to be met and overcome in any modern constitutional state.
- There is, then, the directly opposed option of a totalized de-statization of the EU – i.e. the creation, on its territory, of a European Free Trade Area in which all politics and all regulation would be in the hands of the member states (as it has existed in the British led EFTA which has lost the institutional competition with the EEC in the 1960s and 1970s). It is remarkable, that even the staunchest defenders of the neo liberal model do not advocate this model – which would effectively dissolve the kind of Hayekian economic government the EU is now exerting over its member states, respectively reduce it to the kind of absolute minimum regulation characteristic for the WTO. Most probably, as the illusion has worn out that it would be possible to create a totally self-regulating financial market or an absolutely a-political currency, such an option would imply giving up the Euro, reverting to nation based currencies.

²⁶ An entire strand of the institutional debate seems to be fascinated by this option – without, however, realizing that this would be a radical break with the present institutional constellation between the EU and its member states, because it would end their political games of prolonging their own semblance of sovereignty by referring issues to common decision making in the EU, if they wish so, and, instead, would establish a binding authority over them.

- There seems to be, however, a third way of maintaining the hybrid structure of the present EU as a fragmented and selective kind of state, while reinforcing it by the introduction of additional mechanisms of democratic control from below. The key to unfolding such an option of a democratically reinforced European regulatory framework could be found in a critical re-evaluation of a prejudice lingering on from the times of the classical European nation states. This prejudice is based on the mis-understanding of European politics as a kind of 'foreign policy' (and of economic exchanges within the EU as a kind of export-import-business). Within the member states, it leads to mistaking European politics as a 'prerogative' of government and to a tendency of developing an attitude of national cohesion – which goes a long way in masking the real political issues of European politics and in reinforcing the administrative bias in deliberation processes. Just making explicit the political issues and taking away the administrative bias would have far-reaching repercussions in the practice of EU regulation – from 'comitology' via the 'inter-institutional agreements' to the secrecy of the Council etc. Overcoming them would also help to democratically undermine the capability of single states, especially the larger member states, of *de facto* putting out of effect in key cases certain kinds of already binding legislation, especially on constitutional or financial matters, as exemplified by de Gaulle's policy of the „empty chair“ against the agreed constitutional procedure of majority vote, or by Margaret Thatcher's assiduously repeated slogan „I want my money back!“²⁷, without in any way respecting the EU's budget rules.

An alternative idea for an economic government for the Euro-Zone

Asking for a new future for Europe may sound extremely abstract. It should be concretized by combining the questions of what should be done and of who should do it. This can be done today by addressing the problematic of transforming the very notion and the underlying reality of a European economic government.

I shall, therefore, attempt to formulate what this general demand will mean in more concrete terms by taking up the debate on a European Economic Government for the Euro-Zone – which is under discussion since the 1990s, but which has recently been decisively advanced by a learning process occasioned by the global financial crisis since 2007.

An alternative 'European economic government' would have a strong potential for becoming an important partner in a global 'coalition of the willing' of a new kind, i.e. by struggling to develop and to impose the structural reforms needed for addressing the current constellation of structural crises, among the G20 or within UN deliberations, especially by converging in the direction of a seriously redefined global 'sustainable development', liberating itself from the constraints imposed by the accumulation of capital (like e.g. the need for an exponential growth of the GDP, for a continuous geographical expansion or for an unlimited extension of commodification). The present absence of the EU from such endeavours, as well as the rather narrow national horizon of most of them, is certainly not conducive to the successful development and implementation of such strategic political alternatives – although its presence would not automatically make things better: I could also function in the sense of reviving older European imperialist reflexes, as they are still heavily present, even in small member states, like Belgium, the Netherlands or even in Denmark²⁷.

²⁷ Which possesses the historical honour of having been the first European state to abolish slavery (also in its West Indian possessions), in a historical period before modern nationalism – but which is nowadays deeply rift by the racist heritage of European colonialism.

European integration of a new kind²⁸ could indeed prevent the re-emergence of traditional European strands of ‚imperialist‘ politics which Germany – as a long term world champion in exports (now overtaken by China) -, France and Great Britain – as former world powers with a still relevant colonial heritage which continue to draw short-term advantages from unfair practices in international commerce, instead of developing the capacity of basing their international relations on fair exchanges of mutual interest. More specifically, Germany has been using a practice of significant wage dumping during the last decades, ‚succeeding‘ to bring all other member countries into a debtor position, because this was their only way of compensating for their trade deficit, France has been trying to use the remains of its colonial empire for defending its prominent role within its former ‚zones of influence‘, and Great Britain seems to have salvaged a position as an external partner of the global hegemony of the US from its former global imperial role, especially by functioning as a major secondary centre of the US-centred Wall street complex of financial enterprise and power. Given that there are increasingly high internal destructive effects – which could be presented as ‚costs‘ – for these special roles and relationships of leading EU countries it would indeed be highly beneficial for these countries themselves, if their societies were liberated from the burden (for most or at least for many of its inhabitants²⁹). It would therefore help these countries to bring about the urgently needed first steps if their ‚special paths‘ of development were ended by a kind of European integration prodding them to overcome these traditional ways of ‚beggar-my-neighbour‘-policies in a large sense. To begin with, binding, effective, and democratically decided and implemented guidelines for member states ‚economic and financial policies, as well as a political framework for the ECB, would make a significant and positive difference in comparison to the present state of affairs. The elaboration and monitoring of such guidelines, including clearly defined short-term, middle-term and long-term perspectives, would constitute the core task of an ‚alternative economic government‘; and due to the constraints and imperatives of the European monetary union the development of such a political capacity is now long overdue. It should start in the Eurozone, where the need for it (pace Greece) is decidedly most urgent, but it should make it possible for the member-states outside of the Euro-zone to participate in their own right. This implies that such an ‚economic authority‘ would have to be the explicit contrary to a neo-liberal ‚economic government‘ à la Hayek.

The notion of a ‚European economic government‘ has only created in the times after the neo-liberal way out of the crisis of ‚Fordism‘ had been imposed in principle, i.e. after the neo-liberal turn of the EU as a historical community. Hayek’s problematic of preventing the ‚broad masses‘ from having any decisive influence on economic policies has been at its inner core: protecting ‚market liberty‘, i.e. the liberty of private property, from the ‚irrationality‘ of democratic political processes was achieved by European arrangements which served to secure and sharpen the implementation of the new global logic of ‚market rule‘ which had more or less withdrawn most central items of economic policy (trade and capital movements, tariffs, exchange rates, interest rates, taxation and public credit) from the reach of most governments, let alone legislative bodies or electorates. As in the case of the new global institutions the new EU was relying on a combination of automatic mechanisms with their on-going monitoring and interpretation by expert bodies, supposedly totally devoid of politics.

²⁸ I differ from my friends Étienne Balibar and Alain Lipietz in not accepting the argument that *any* kind of political European integration will serve this function: Historically speaking, we should not forget that there also has been a Nazi project of European integration under post-national ‚aryan‘ auspices (cf. Kahrs et al. 1992).

²⁹ It is necessary to go down here to the abstract category of ‚inhabitants‘, because it is part of this European colonial heritage to have redefined the category of ‚citizenship‘ in exclusive terms, while relegating many groups of people to a status of mere ‚denizens‘.

With the introduction of the Euro as the common currency of most member states the debate on a 'European economic governance' has been specifically concretized: It raised the problem of introducing – alongside with the intergovernmental co-ordination already operative for the EU as a whole, focussed on the 'single market', which was supposed to be assured by the ECOFIN council, and by the 'Broad Economic Policy Guidelines' prepared by a meeting of the secretaries of state pertaining to it – a specific authority for shaping the main lines of economic policy for the Euro group. As long as there was no acute financial or economic crisis lurking in the background, i.e. until 2007, especially the German governments have managed to block the emergence of such a level of EU politics: Based on a national economy still very much on the offensive on world market level, they seem to have expected that such an authority capable of defining something more positive in terms of economic policies than the negative framework laid down in the Stability and Growth Pact (which was supposed to limit public debt, especially precluding massive 'deficit spending') would be superfluous and potentially dangerous for their world market oriented national economy.

The sequence of global crises from 2007 to 2009 – which were no more limited to macro-regional segments of the global economy like the preceding structural crises incurred by the neo-liberal paradigm – have made it clear that some kind of politically active 'economic government' was needed for the Euro zone, even if it were only considered on neo-classic or on Hayekian premises. Active and sometimes massive interventions by governments into the economy did not automatically constitute a departure from the neo-liberal paradigm in economic policy.³⁰

The German government – in the face of these requirements of common and concerted crisis management – has explicitly dropped its long-standing opposition against even talking about an 'economic government' for the Euro zone. This has constituted no major change of policy: The idea of an eventual political support of the ECB to be given by member states' governments had always been latent within the notion of a central bank explicitly devoid of any political dimension as the central instance of European monetary policy as can be seen from the explicit division of tasks inscribed in the European treaty constituting it which gives only the competence for (internal) monetary policy to the ECB, while reserving (external) currency policy to the council of ministers. This latent role of the member states as an ultimate authority safeguarding the 'credibility' of the ECB in a situation of impending deep crisis only had to be made explicit to be translated into common and concerted action by those governments. To organize and to specify this member states action will be the decisive remit of the 'economic government' of the Euro zone.

Other member states, led by the French government – relying upon national economies with a more limited European and less global horizon – have pleaded from the very beginning for a specific 'economic government' for the Euro zone, which should not be limited to negative framework definition, but which would specifically co-ordinate the positive economic policies, especially industrial development strategies, to be implemented by and within the EU member states. Such an 'economic government' would have to build its capability not only of modulating the industrial cycle, as well of introducing measures and programmes to support specific industrial developments – still below the threshold of a strong trade cycle policy of 'euro-Keynesian' inspiration, but going beyond mere maintenance of monetary stability and credit availability foreseen in the ECB tasks. Such a line of acting as a 'competition state' (Joachim Hirsch) specifically intervening with the aim of strengthening

³⁰ E. g. the concerted decision of the governments of the Euro zone to create an 'umbrella' for the Euro with an amount of 750 billion to defend the Euro against speculative attacks has illustrated the impressive scope of government action in this respect, while at the same time demonstrating the indispensability of government action in certain situations of financial and economic crisis.

the position of national industries could be successfully transferred to the EU acting as a unified agency of economic and financial policy making.

This is still rather far from any notion of an alternative economic government for the Euro zone, but it could well provide a bridge towards more properly 'euro-Keynesian' notions and projects (as they seem to have been envisaged in Oskar Lafontaine's dealings with Dominique Strauss-Kahn, when they were both Ministers of Finance) or as they are formulated, quite explicitly, in the demands of the Euro-Memo group). For the needed more ambitious transformation programmes they would just serve as very first steps to open a significant debate: Because a solidarity oriented, feminist and ecological transformation of the highly integrated economies of the Euro zone would quite evidently require not just adequate European legislation, but a European economic government capable of implementing it in particular situations and in singular actions.

In order to concretize the demand for a European economic government in a democratic and emancipative perspective it is required that the criteria are clearly articulated, by which it is opposing the kind of de-politicized 'economic government' imposed by the Hayekian model of European politics. This will also make it possible clearly to demarcate the notion of an 'alternative economic government' from the ideas about a kind of 'economic government' for the Euro zone which seems to be imposing itself in the present developments – as a result of some – very limited – learning processes triggered by the crisis of 2007 and 2008.

The fundamental and decisive criterion for such an approach should be – in an explicit countering of Hayek's central intention – to replace the institutionalized blockade of any significant political participation of the 'masses' by strategies of facilitating and supporting democratic initiatives from below and civil society processes of deliberation concerning crucial economic and social issues. This would bring about nothing less than replacing the logic of the present neo-liberal constitution of the EU by a new logic of democratic initiative and positive integration, i.e. a kind of European regulation promoting specific answers to the problems posed by the present constellation of crises.

This basic demand may be specified in three directions:

- First, in the direction of fully activating and using the real economic potential of social movements and initiatives, for which an alternative European economic government will have to create occasions, support and incentives, also by redistributing real and financial resources by making them available to such initiatives;
- second, in the direction of expanding the reach of control by parliamentary bodies and civil society structures for all areas of activity of the EU and the co-operation of its member states in a specific and concrete way, helping to bring them to full accountability and transparency and bringing them into the open of an increasingly European public, out of the twilight of 'intergovernmentality' and 'corporatism';
- third, in the direction of achieving quantitative leap in the financial resources available for such a European economic government restructured under the criteria of 'empowerment', transparency and democratic accountability. This can only be achieved by the creation of a minimum of a European tax state, relying upon taxes of its own, as well as upon fixed quota of member states' taxation results, and by the introduction of an EU debt regime which would open the possibility of a long term EU debt (Euro-bonds).

It is of decisive importance at this point of the argument, first, that these specifications may only function in a reasonable way, when these three directions will be combined in a mutually reinforcing way. Isolated strategies of support to the so-called 'Third Sector' on its own will not constitute a real alternative to established economic policy. Nor will such an alternative be brought about by isolated improvements of the transparency, the democratic accountability or even the size of the EU budget. And, second, that these demands on the European level should not serve as pretexts for giving up the corresponding efforts within civil society processes or on a national, regional or local scale: Quite to the contrary, such an alternative type of

‘European economic government will only in so far be effective in a middle-term and long-term sustainable way, as it will succeed to foster and to reinforce such initiatives from below.

Summing up: Historical alternatives and new perspectives for Europe

Reconquering a new future for Europe will be no easy task. It will not be possible without deviating from the paths of development embodied in mainstream conceptions like Global Europe: Without finding its true place within global humanity Europe will simply not have a sustainable future (independent from the difficult normative question whether it will deserve it).

An alternative European policy will not be possible in the perspective of reproducing privileges of Europe deriving from its ‘imperial’ past. What I have been talking about, is a new New Deal for Europe to make a global New Deal possible and to make macro-regional viz. continental New Deals elsewhere easier.

Without falling into the trap of economicism which tries to give a higher theoretical justification to the terror exercised by the actually existing capitalist structure of our economies, it is to be admitted that it will not be possible to find a new future for Europe without an alternative macro-economic strategy and without an accompanying strategy of socio-ecological conversion.³¹

The strategic proposals outlined here make use of the on-going transformation process from traditional nation states to member states of supra-national institutions exemplified most strongly by the EU, but a tangible reality also in other institutional contexts, from the UN via the OECD, the Basle banking frameworks and the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF and World Bank, as redefined since the 1970s): The EU has to be understood as being in a process of constituting a non-state polity, anyway and in an irreversible manner – and the task a hand is no more that of a mere eco-social transformation of existing nation states and their national economies, but rather that of introducing and reinforcing real democratic elements into the workings of this new polity, i.e. especially introducing the needed elements of initiative from below and democratic accountability and control into it, while at the same time building and enhancing the capacity of the new polity for initiating and controlling processes of socio-ecological transformation. This includes the need for recognizing the plurality of peoples in Europa and the challenges this poses for the required cohesion, as well of the needed diversification within this new polity, with the implication of developing the European dimension within all member states in a relatively autonomous way.

In the way outlined the EU will also reinforce its own global significance: no more by using a surplus of power still derived from its imperial past, but by becoming one political crystallization point for political initiatives in the framework of a global socio-ecological conversion (as e.g. to some degree with regard to renewable energy) and, last not least, by developing a new model of non-imperial macro-economic and developmental co-ordination which would offer a perspective of transforming the UN system (as exemplified by the ECE as macro-regional entity of co-ordination), without falling into the hierarchies implicit in the Bretton Woods institutions and WTO models. This presupposes, however, that the EU – and Europe – will meet the major challenges of the present constellation of crises, in order to become a major player for global change among others – which will certainly require deeply revising the Lisbon objective of competitiveness, as well as its unbroken continuation in the *Global Europe* anticipations.

³¹ In alluding to such strategies and exemplifying some key elements, I have relied upon using ideas discussed in the context of the Euro-Memo group, as well as of the German SÖU group (group on socio-ecological conversion) which is preparing a major publication for fall 2010.

It cannot be doubted: There will be no way back to the fordist type of European integration, yet it cannot be denied any more that there have been real alternatives then and that there are heading towards new alternatives today. Politics will not be eliminated by experts using cognitive disorientation as a major strategy, denying pressing problems and displacing the issues as they are presented by historical reality. Rediscovering politics as an irreplaceable dimension of an effective practice of responsibility, of undiminished and undivided citizenship, and inventing new ways of developing the capacity to act of the multitudes on all levels and in all dimensions of political processes will be required in order to overcome the present political stagnation in front of the complex crisis which is continuing to shake the global constellation of states and societies, as well as the specifically European configuration which has taken shape in the EU.

Thinking specifically about the EU as a locus of intense struggle and a space for transition and transformation will help us, I would like to submit in conclusion, to overcome the scary notion of TINA (,There is no alternative!) without lapsing into the untenable illusions of BEHOGA (,Behold Our Grand Alternative!') or seeking refuge in the far too modest orientation expressed by TAMARA (,There are many and real alternatives!'). Addressing the transformation of the EU in a radical and yet (in principle) realistic way will help us to bring forth and to propagate a new orientation for radical politics: Let us build our common alternative! (LUBOCA)

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