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A Europe of Values

The Only Real Limits of Europe is Democracy – J. Semprun

“A Union of Values” is a marvellous document with respect to policy as is Jan Olbrycht’s “Upholding Strong Values” but I fear the biggest problem with Europe’s values is much more at the procedural (constitutive) level: the values which breathe life into democratic practice are the ones that are most endangered. Put differently, if the democratic values upon which the European Union is based are ignored, as they appear to be in the eyes of many, the professed Christian Democrat values of the European People’s Party lose their credibility both in Europe and in the world. It is not only the finance crisis that has the European Union in the doldrums but the “democracy deficit”. It leads to voter apathy – 43% participation in the last election.

European Union is an 1) experiment – 2) in democracy. It is not predetermined to succeed. That is a matter of mobilizing a political will to an “ever closer union”.

The European Union is a political institution (Hochleitner et al. “European Values and Identity”) and its most basic values are political values, the values that are immanent in democratic practice. Here there is an important parallel to the finance crisis: the more complex our institutions become the more they have to assume to be self-evident, which is another way of saying the more we must overlook the basis of our own actions to be able to act at all. This leads to a kind of benign neglect of the foundations upon which those actions rest that over time in turn ceases to be benign over time as the truisms of finance or democracy

Democracy is formally or institutionally a matter of parliaments and parties

but democratic institutions do not function democratically in the absence of the pursuit of the Common Good in a pluralist context – where pluralism refers to both the pursuit of economic interests, i.e., competition and cultural, including religious differences.

Democracy thrives only where there is a will to pluralism across political difference, where there exists, if you like, political ecumenism – that is:

a commitment to creating a common life across differences of cultural perspectives and economic interests, personal perspectives and interests, party perspectives and interests, governmental perspectives and interest at all levels from local to international –

inwardly and outwardly as Europe constitutes itself structurally and in the world.

Pluralism means accepting differences and that implies criticism and self-criticism. Critical thinking is the basis of the democratic process. Critical discourse constitutes a community across differences of perspective and interest.

Europe is a unity in diversity. The beginning was a reconciliation between enemies that was a re-newal through re-form. Renewal and reform are values that are deeply democratic and deeply Christian in nature. They should therefore be eminent values among Christian Democrats.

Europe has been most successful in prompting democracy in the post-communist east but, paradoxically less so with respect to its own internal functioning. The Lisbon Treaty, assuming that will be finally ratified, is a step in the right direction with respect to reducing the “democracy deficit” but only a step. We need to go farther.

Kurt Biedenkopf:

“The real test on Europe is whether it can manage to stay together” 22.02.09

The finance crisis is the tip of the iceberg – a crisis of European elites that has to be resolved by those very elites. Political reform is what is called for.

More participation down to the local level. The task of European Union parliamentarians: creating a European forum for open debate. The Economist cites one insider: the European Union parliament is a successful institution except with respect to its *raison d'être*: linking the Europeans to the European Union. This is especially the case with respect to the youth in a country like Austria, where they are increasingly turning to the far right. We desperately need such a forum to breathe life into our moribund European Union democracy – among other things to be an example both to disaffected youth and the rest of the world. Democratic politicians are teachers, among other things moral teachers. Their example is worth a thousand words.

Aristotle, who in many ways merits the title of European philosopher par excellence made a distinction that can help us here: between true politics as opposed to good politics. True politics is politics that aims at the good of society as a whole; it looks beyond narrow private interest. Good politics consists in sound lawgiving, i.e., find the best legal means to achieve our ends. That is indispensable but it is not yet true politics. True politics is politics for a society that thrives as a whole and not at somebody's expense. He saw that the essential abiding tension within democracy is between the prosperous minority and the less-well-off majority, between freedom and equality, if you like, as its defining factor. Thus arguing about the question, "what is democratic" is an essential feature in democratic societies in just the way that "soft" Eurosceptics suggest. This is an eternal conflict within democracy that has to be channelled if it is not to become destructive of the Union itself. Thus embracing conflict is the key to true democracy.

The late Sir Ralf Dahrendorf made the point in the following way:

"Conflict keeps societies open to change and prevents dogmatization of error.

Aversion to conflict is a basic trait of authoritarian political thought....

[Embracing conflict]... alone does justice to the creativity of social antagonism as a motivation of social change. [Suppressing conflict produces] ...

unexpected and uncontrollable responses of the suppressed forces". S&D in G, 184.

This is reform and renewal look like from the point of the leadership of democracy in Europe today.

Pluralism is not a matter of mere tolerance but of real encounter with people with different views and values. Rather than marginalize such differences democrats must embrace them. For that we need, for example, Islam centers for Muslims and for Europeans both at our universities.

In order to foster the cohesion necessary for political unity, European politics must allow and nurture a genuine European identity, which in turn implies the creation of a European civil society. The political culture of Europe must, in addition be compatible with a sense of community rooted in a common European culture". This is the task of a European public philosophy.

Civility is the key to creating a European common good.

"in our day the common good has decidedly ceased to be merely the common good of a nation and has not yet succeeded in constituting itself as the common good of the civilized community but the good thing about this term is that it contains implicitly the idea of the common good of civilized society as a whole" (Maritain, 1947, 48).