



The politics of the EU as crisis, mobilization and catharsis

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Abstract

Through the analysis of the crisis, and its impact on European identity and on politics and party systems, this review provides three contributions. First, the persistence of crisis throughout the history of European integration is explained as a significant factor strengthening the EU and triggering the emergence of the social construction of embedded narratives. These tensions deal with identity, culture and attitudes towards the EU, but also with the EU at the political level and the role of the EU as global actor. This leads to the second debate, with a focus on the different impact the crisis has had, by examining the case of the United Kingdom, Poland and Germany. The crisis indicates the salience of the national contexts, institutions, actors and narratives, shaping the responses, while the domestic experiences, towards the responses themselves, stress divergences and differences across member states. Third, the focus on Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, and their party system, addresses the possible prolonged long-lasting crisis, characterizing the Southern member states. As Jean Monnet wrote, it is not the institutions that create the EU, but the people who shape the institutions. Further research can address how the EU is differently represented, experienced and articulated.

Keywords EU · Crisis · Identity · EU integration

The Euro Crisis and European Identities

C. Galpin

Palgrave Macmillan, New Perspectives in German Political Studies, Basingstoke, 2017, 259 pp., £89.99/£71.50, ISBN: 978-3-319-51610-3 (hardcover)

The Politics of Crisis in Europe

M. K. Davis Cross

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, 248 pp., £22.99, ISBN: 9781316602355 (paperback)

The Impact of the Economic Crisis on South European Democracies

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L. Morlino and F. Raniolo

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2017, 142 pp., £49.99/£39.99, ISBN: 978-3-319-52370-5 (hardcover)

The European Communities (European Coal and Steel Community: ECSC, the European Economic Community: EEC and Euratom) was founded on a shattered continent after the II World War with the strategic aim of moving towards a united Europe. Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister, launched a plan for Europe, on 9 May 1950, that has now become the basis of what followed. Pooling together coal and steel, when these were vital industries for France and Germany also signalled the symbolic rapprochement of the continent. Yet, just after a few years, the Euratom Treaty saw a slowdown due to the sensitivities of industries that touched also the national defence of the member states. Since then, the European Studies literature seems to embrace the notion that the EU progresses by crisis (Parsons and Matthijs 2015) or is in a permanent state of crisis (Schimmelfennig 2018).

The crisis is here the focus of each book examined, as experienced, as process and as factor; or as independent variable, affecting institutional and political changes. Charlotte Galpin addresses two main questions, (i) *To what extent has the Euro crisis affected the construction of European identities?*, and (ii) *How and why does the effect of the crisis differ between countries with different identities and experiences of the crisis?* (2017, p. 4). Mai'a K. Davis Cross adopts an original comparative approach and focuses on societal actors, beyond the media, EU elites, politicians, the public and opinion shapers to explore to what extent also average events in the EU integration process become major crises and work as amplifiers and threat multipliers (2018, p. 7). The last book of this review is the one authored by Leonardo Morlino and Francesco Raniolo (2017), who move the analysis to the economic crisis and impact on Southern member states. In their book, their main interest develops across three interrelated questions around the economic crisis and party systems, with the focus on the electoral success of new protest parties, *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain, the *Five Star Movement* in Italy and the almost successful *Earth Party* in Portugal. They address how conjectural events, like the economic crisis, can have a lasting impact on the political system across different countries; what these consequences might be; and what mechanisms can explain them (2017, pp. 1–3).

While the European Union (EU) has progressed through the crisis, the most recent one, with the 2016 British EU referendum, after the economic and financial crisis (2010–2012) have represented what Erik Jones (2015) defines the most post-modern crisis across the ones already experienced. The British referendum can be interpreted as an empty signifier, and similarly to Davis Cross' analysis (2018), this is then amplified by the narratives and debates and further created a widening distance between citizens and actual problems. By examining the crisis, Etienne Balibar (2015) pointed to the central role that citizens could take, in the current breakdown, his research pointed to the demands that citizens could have and calling that Europe should have taken.

Each book I review here brings together an analysis around these recent crises, citizens and the EU. They highlight their original contribution to the study of European integration and crises, while also helping understand why episodes of



‘integrational panic’ become debated as the EU integration process is nearing an unprecedented crisis or presented the next step towards the end of the EU (Davis Cross 2018, p. 1), in the scholarly and media debates.

The Euro Crisis and European Identities addresses the impact of the crisis on European identity, and the different experiences, also based on the varying histories shared with the EU, in Germany, Ireland and Poland. Ma’ia Davis Cross examines the crisis through three major challenges for the EU, the Constitutional Treaty, the Iraq War and the Eurozone crisis. Leonardo Morlino and Francesco Raniolo focus on the possible long-term impact of the economic crisis across four Southern democracies, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Although the crisis is the independent variable here examined, every contribution offers an original approach and a different dependent variable. In the case of Davis Cross’ monograph, the interest is in the nature of the crisis itself within the process of EU integration. The academic literature has already addressed whether the EU is doomed (Zielonka 2014) or moved towards proposals for a new theory of disintegration (Jones 2018). The interest here, in this review, through these contributions’ lenses, is to deepen those questions, and offer an overview of the research approach and puzzle behind each project within an alternative perspective. This enables enlighten issues underpinning contemporary research in politics and European Studies, as each book advances research on different aspects of the crisis, its study and its impact. They are similar, but offer theoretical and empirical analyses, with a focus on different regions of Europe or different EU crises. All of them enhance our research agenda, answer questions on the analysis of the crisis and offer a coherent picture of the issues to understand the current stage of the EU integration process now and in future perspective. I contend that this is critical to examine and discuss the current challenges of the EU, after the EUCO agreement and the contested debates in the European Parliament for cuts to research and the digital strategy, in addition to a rather urgent mechanism to tie EU funds to the rule of law, and explore and discuss how the EU should be governed. This becomes more urgent now due to increasing debates, following the impact of the financial and economic crisis, the Greek and British referenda, the refugee crisis, the retreat of democracy in some member states and the post-COVID19 pandemic. This can entail discussing the situations in which it is reasonable or desirable to expect the EU to respond to different challenges of democratic governability. The contributions do not expect that the EU moves towards answering democratic governability and neither assume that the responses towards a more normative account should be expected, nor that the EU’s responses always necessarily answer to democratic governability, but they enable understand the different aspects, actors, voices and narratives of the crises, how we can interpret them within the overarching long-term process of EU integration and its impact at the party system and political parties levels. The analysis on whether there exist similar patterns, or significant differences show also how domestic politics and the EU change in relation to public contestation, and how we can understand and interpret any slowdown of the EU integration process.

In reading the books, I draw out three major debates on Europe and the crisis. The first addresses the persistence of crisis moments throughout the history of European integration, and its success, that is very much common to most of the literature, with some exceptions (see Parsons and Matthijs 2015). As Davis Cross explains,



these same crises have often defied media-driven expectations and opened to an ever-closer union, by strengthening the EU (Davis Cross 2018, p. 219). More importantly, crises trigger also the emergence of the social construction of the embedded narratives, and the resurgence of ‘social tensions’ that would otherwise possibly halt or slowdown EU integration. These tensions deal with both identity, culture and attitudes towards the EU, but also with the political level and the role of the EU as global actor. This leads to the second debate, and book, showing and exploring how, at times of crisis, identities become salient. The focus on the different impact the crises have by examining three different cases studies, the UK, Poland and Germany, shows the salience of the national contexts, institutions, actors and narratives on the responses and the domestic experiences towards the responses themselves. Although there may exist common themes and issues, and common patterns across identity discourses, Galpin underlines to what extent the crisis is able to stress divergences and differences across member states (Galpin 2017, p. 213). Finally, the third debate centres on the role of political parties, and how democracies adapt to the crisis, specifically the empirical analysis shows how the political party can become a catalyst (Morlino and Raniolo 2017, p. 121). The cases under investigation, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, close on the possible challenges of the crisis for political leaders, both at the domestic and EU levels, with a possible outcome towards a prolonged long-lasting crisis (Morlino and Raniolo 2017, p. 122).

Whether we study crises and EU integration, the recent Euro crisis and identity, or the impact of the economic crisis among Southern European democracies, these volumes help expand our research agenda, focusing on questions around EU integration, identity and political mobilization. These studies show that ‘ideational entrepreneurs’ are critical to help sustain a constructive engagement with both the EU and the EU integration process (Galpin 2017, p. 214). This is particularly important as they can further engage with ‘solidarity mechanisms’, as the recent COVID19 experience has been demanding, but also among the EU member states that joined in 2004, when solidarity was an important theme of the integration process as candidate countries, but now show resilience to accept refugee quotas once in the EU.

Mai’a K. Davis Cross (2018) starts from the analysis of different—systemic, behavioural and sociological—approaches to study the crisis in social science, and sociological, and by showing the role of societal actors, she underlines how the sociological approach is fundamental to explore possible gaps between perceptions and events on the ground (2018, pp. 26–30). Poignantly, at the end of the 1990s, an analysis by Christopher J. Anderson addressed how the mass publics could be at the same time ignorant about the EU integration process, while acting in a rather self-interested way when thinking of economic benefits (1998, p. 573). Perceptions and people’s evaluation at the domestic level can offer an important basis to understand how people decide on the EU. Proxies, as defined by Anderson (1998), and perceptions can indicate how citizens talk about the EU and see the EU (Guerra 2013). By examining narratives and communication in the public sphere, Galpin (2017, pp. 18–23) addresses the return of crises and explores identity. Her research shows that discourses on European identity are resilient and embedded at the national level. This had been shown by Oliver Daddow in the British case, where positive European values have been missing the domestic narrative and could have possibly help



to shift a rather apathetic or sceptical attitudes towards multi-level identities, as feeling British and European (2011, p. 34). This is underlined also by Galpin, asserting that the economic and financial crisis has further re-energized negative discourses about Europe, where the EU is viewed as the enemy or the other, and the Euro, as a flawed project (2017, p. 199). As, she brilliantly explains, the British referendum can be understood as the consequence of a battle that has been going on within the Conservative party since the 1980s, but also the persistent and embedded negative discourse about Europe and the Euro within an anti-EU media system (Galpin 2017, p. 200). The link between English identity and Europe has never shown a positive relationship. Reluctant or awkward, the relationship with Europe has developed through an othering process, within a Manichean narrative of the Continent, over—and far from—the Channel (Galpin 2017, p. 2017). By adopting a constructivist ontology, the first chapters of Galpin's book locate the research question and analysis, by challenging the predominant position that identity changes at times of crisis. Looking at the Euro crisis, where the Euro represents an identity marker, the study focuses on the daily connections between national and European identities, using the marble cake model (2017, p. 23).

In both Galpin's and Davis Cross' books, the Eurozone crisis can be fully understood, when we examine how it is socially constructed, through the integrational panic model, as amplified by the media. As explained, the only country that suffered from a major crisis was Greece. Greece is also a case study in the third book (Morlino and Raniolo 2017, p. 28) and although similar in general trends on political participation within the Southern research design, this Southern country also shows some specific characteristics. Greece has experienced a more radical raise in participation and a new fall of participation, after a wave of disappointment and alienation towards new parties, Syriza and Golden Dawn. In their initial chapters, Morlino and Raniolo explain their research interest, exploring the political consequences of the economic crisis, by examining elections, protest and interests. With a steady worsening of the Human Development Index and increasing social and economic inequalities, the crisis rewarded left wing parties both in Spain and Greece (*Syriza* and *Podemos*), but, more importantly, shifted bipolarization to a tripolarization, except for Portugal. Greece magnified these changes, as it happened for four elections, between 2012 and 2015 (2017, pp. 35). In Greece, the austerity costs brought to persistent and radical mobilization and protest (Morlino and Raniolo 2017, p. 43). What is clear and emerges across the analysis is that beyond common patterns there are specific national characteristics.

This is the focus in Galpin's analysis (2017). In Germany, the economic crisis has been framed as the Greek crisis, with Germany taking the full burden of responsibility (2017, p. 84). Angela Merkel's initial cautious position towards helping Greece is explained by Galpin in order to defend the stability of the single currency and the Euro, more than Germany, vis-à-vis the Constitutional Court, but also due to the constraints of domestic politics. The public could see increasing negative attitudes towards the common currency, but could also shift their support towards populist parties (2017, p. 85). This, however, later changed. In Germany, the adoption of the Euro has always been presented with a link to European identity, and with Helmut Kohl's reference to 'good Europeanness' (2017,



p. 86). As such, the 2010–2012 economic crisis could be viewed as a threat to EU integration. This is supported by Merkel's discourse, where the role of Germany is interpreted as a strong actor supporting cooperation and the EU overall, but also the stability of the European treaties and the Eurozone (Galpin 2017, p. 91). Galpin explains this can only be understood within 'the incorporation of ordoliberalism into understandings of Europe' (2017, pp. 79). This returns in an analysis done by Claus Offe on order in the Euro zone, referring to the German framing of both the EMU and the EU, with an obsession for order (Ferrera and Offe 2018). That is linked to the post-war Federal Republic and the support for a stable social order, in particular after Germany was being named 'the sick man of Europe' at the end of the 1990s (Galpin 2017, p. 78). This plays out in a European Union where conflicting narratives of winners and losers meet, and, as Galpin addresses, are lived and articulated within different experiences and traditions, further articulated in a multilingual and fragmented public sphere (Ferrera and Offe 2018).

This resonates with the findings of the CODES project run by Aneta Világi and Pavol Babos at Comenius University in Bratislava (in Guerra 2017). The project brought together citizens, schools and think tanks through workshops and events in Austria, Latvia, Slovakia and Germany. While research has found some common trends (Guerra 2017), it is interesting to return to the Greece and Germany dichotomy that also Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014) had found. As Galpin (2017) underlines, there are national narratives and frames on Europe, and in Greece it points to the Weimarization of the EU, while in Germany it addresses that rules are not applied equally. This emerged in a focus group, where a participant addressed whether this is actually a Union of 28 member states, perceiving the loss of shared core values and lack of solidarity. (Guerra 2017) Similarly, the blame game is used in Latvia, with Euro-conflicted-ness, where citizens complain that the country diligently implements and implemented any reform or EU requirements, and still needs to pay or show solidarity for countries like Greece, that, as cited in the focus group, has always abused the system. (Guerra 2017) Further, as Galpin notes (2017) there are different narratives within the same domestic environment. In Germany, based on wealth distribution, left political actors have articulated solidarity in terms of sharing also debts liabilities, accepting the disadvantages as single European people. (2017, pp. 93–94) This is sometimes challenged at the domestic level, where political actors tend to reproduce a double language between Brussels and domestic politics. Political elites can have a long-term impact on the adoption of the 'blame the EU' narrative at the domestic level, as Mr Eduard Kukan MEP noted. (Guerra 2017) Crises help this narrative, as crisis is based on a construction that posits the Self versus the Other. This resonates in the everyday lived experiences, where the national context is contrasted with the international narrative, well represented by Brussels, and the EU (see Wodak and Angouri 2014). National political actors can use a critique for strategic domestic political reasons (Wodak and Angouri 2014, p. 418), with blame entering the narrative, where the EU becomes an easy target to be blame-worthy (Guerra 2019) This is further supported by the fact that remote governance is extremely difficult to be communicated, and possibly communication needs to start locally (Guerra 2017).



Davis Cross explains the unfolding of the crisis, by specifically looking at the role of political leaders, the public and the media. In her analysis, the crisis builds up through social reactions by then becoming to be perceived as a threat for the continuation of the—EU—system (2018, p. 36). As she stresses, political leaders play a role in this dynamic, and, as the media, they have ‘the ability to shape public opinion’ (2018, p. 37). Most importantly, by comparing three crises (the Iraq Crisis, the Constitutional Treaty Crisis and the Eurozone Crisis), Davis Cross shows that crises provide a window of opportunity, starting from the assumption, based on previous analyses, that crises have also helped clarify the issues at stake and struggle towards consensus (2018, p. 40). Changing the level of analysis, and looking at party systems, Morlino and Raniolo find that the economic crisis also affected an organizational and mobilization component (2017, p. 78), where populist parties with a strong (charismatic leader) suffer from an expected weakness, strong under the leadership, but weak in organizational terms. The need to create a sense of belonging affects the longevity of the party, if this is not able to secure a loyal electorate, which becomes increasingly challenging, despite the left–right cleavage has become a salient one at times of economic crisis (Morlino and Raniolo 2017, pp. 79–80).

This aspect returns in the Irish and Polish chapters in Galpin’s book (2017). The crisis unfolds as, in all cases, as a crisis of national identity and European integration (Galpin 2017, p. 123). As in the case of Germany, in Ireland, the narrative slightly shifted. Up to 2010, the crisis was presented, within a populist narrative, as an Irish economic crisis, and seen in historical terms. On the contrary, since 2011, the crisis becomes European and addresses both the Irish and the European economy (Galpin 2017, pp. 127–128). Further, as seen in the case of Greece, or Latvia, the debate is framed between big member states versus small member states. The reference is to the disadvantageous ‘Merkozy’ axis or the German ‘solitary, splendour of supremacy’ (in Galpin 2017, p. 137). As in the Greek crisis at the time of the 2015 referendum (Fanoulis and Guerra 2017), Galpin stresses how, in Ireland, the crisis has not represented a critical juncture, but it can be framed in terms of path-dependent discourses on the state (2017, p. 140). This further leads to the final Polish case, where Europe is seen as the return to the geographical and political space Poland always belonged to, but also in terms both of solidarity and sovereignty. Low expectations from EU integration led to high levels of public support that have remained rather stable after joining the EU (Guerra 2013). Yet, even if the economic crisis did not largely affect Poland, that has not joined the Eurozone yet, Jarosław Kaczyński, as leader of Law and Justice (*Sprawo i Sprawiedliwość*) stressed that Poland was no longer the poor neighbour—or in his words the ‘irritating cousin everybody had to deal with’, but a successful economic country with social stability (in Galpin 2017, p. 147). As in the Greek crisis, the narrative shifted also in Poland, and it became a European crisis. The crisis was perceived as the crisis of those member states at the periphery of Europe, with the discourse reasserting the centrality of Poland in Europe, able to sit as a strong and stable member states at the table of the political debates.

The lesson we can draw is that crises are lived within the national context and reflect the narrative that is socially constructed, by reproducing the history and tradition of the country. In a way, we can suggest that, as for Euroscepticism, the idea of



Europe and the way Europe is socially constructed at the domestic level is embedded within the domestic European integration process. Also, when the crisis acts as possible threat, as of loss of sovereignty, in the case of Ireland and Poland, or of the European project, in the case of Germany and Poland, it reflects the degrees of freedom of a possible contestation, and a limit of EU legitimacy within contestation, that Galpin's book stresses in the conclusions. Similarly, Morlino and Raniolo (2017) address whether the impact of the crisis will worsen or deepen democracies in the Southern regions. The answer possibly comes from Davis Cross (2018) through catharsis. Catharsis is explained the after crisis experience, releasing the tension suffered (2018, p. 45). When crises can be used as opportunities to release tensions, and by targeting solidarity, EU leaders can be able to move forward through consensus further integration (2018, p. 46).

Conclusion

The recent crises have produced scholarly contributions on the impact, development and influence of the crises themselves and possible changes at the domestic, European and international levels. These books offer three different analyses, but create a debate and reach rather similar conclusions. These crises emerge and develop within their domestic context and are socially constructed by the mass publics, the politics and the debates at the national level. While we tend to examine the crisis as a slowdown of the process of EU integration, these contributions open up to opportunities and new avenues both towards empirical research and possible developments. As Davis Cross stresses European integration has always involved incremental processes and gradualism (2018, p. 233), while the party systems reflect a mobilization that is still in development (Morlino and Raniolo 2017). Galpin (2017) further stresses the need to engage with these domestic voices and with their ideological entrepreneurship. This is definitely emerging. The 2016 British referendum has changed the Eurobarometer data trends, where citizens seem to be more positive towards the EU. In Britain herself, marches show the strength of mobilization, enacting citizenship, but also reclaiming justice (Brändle et al. 2018). Here, research can further develop, by listening to citizens' voices. It is undeniable that a key theme emerging from current debates in the literature is that the debate over Europe, as its contestation, needs to be further refined and understood. Scholarly research is developing to take into account the multi-varied contestation at the EU level that has increased in the post-financial crisis years, with more attention towards the different actors, but also to the diverse objectives and strategies in their evolutionary development and adaptation (Usherwood 2013, p. 280), and its meanings and manifestations across the public.

These three books can offer the basis, depending on the approach and the questions investigated, for further analyses on citizens and Europe, while a broader comparative research design could offer indications on common patterns and characteristics that have already been underlined in the case studies offered by two of them. Crisis or solidarity (Galpin 2017) is likely to represent empty signifiers, as also Jones (2015) had noted after the Greek referendum. The discourse



and the narrative still seem to develop at the domestic level through the protection of the country against the EU. This legitimizes contestation and sustains the presence of polemicism and negativity that can take new opportunities from flows of immigration (Galpin 2017, p. 208) or the recent EUCO debate (July 2020). This can be seen in the British referendum and the logic underpinning the tabloid newspaper narrative and Leavers blogs. A populist rhetoric, as Galpin underlines, created a strong bond among a community (i.e.: Leavers against snob political elites, Bob Geldof, EU institutions, European Commission) and strengthened the debate on the most salient issues, as the protection of sovereignty (vs. the EU). The public, elites and media debates can amplify and strengthen negative news stories about the EU. This can further affect knowledge about the EU and awareness of actual EU politics. In the early years, the EU was conceptualized in terms of cosmopolitanism, the more cognitively mobilized, the higher levels of support, where citizens who think about and discuss political issues, would understand and gravitate towards the supranational organization. Attitudes could also stem from familiarity with the project itself, the more people knew about it, the less fearful they would be of it and thus the more supportive they would. Yet, as seen in these analyses, and in the case of the British referendum, the frames adopted are often articulated as threat to one of citizens' key identities. This can lead to the protection of the in-group at the domestic level. Hence, the European project can bring about the perception of a loss of national identity, underlying exclusively national identifiers and leading towards hostility to the EU. This negativity bias has an important impact on perceived representation of the EU institutions. The media tend to focus on contested debates and can further strengthen opposition. At the same time, research shows that traditional media are likely to help knowledge and seem to be less biased than expected. Still, some political actors, and issues and policies seem to be trapped in this spiral of negativity, which does not help to open a channel for dialogue with dissatisfied and frustrated citizens and can represent the next challenge for the process of EU integration.

The danger, as addressed by Davis Cross, is that repeated crises can 'wear down the fabric of European society' (2018, p. 234). In her analysis, this feeds into misconceptions of the European Union, its distance, its dysfunctional organization, unable to speak with one single voice that further affects how the EU is perceived and its strength as soft power. As these contributions show, the debate over Europe emerges within the domestic political contexts, and the Euro zone crisis has shown that the EU integration is still moving forward. As Jean Monnet wrote, it is not the institutions that create the EU, but the people who shape the institutions. These contributions all shift the narrative around, while the EU has experiences also grassroots mobilization due to austerity and to the British referendum. New research can address what kind of emotions we could share to talk about Europe, new studies at the micro and macro levels can examine local and transnational debates and to what extent they can help close the gap between the citizens and the EU, and understand how the EU is represented and articulated.



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