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AFTER THE STORM

How to Save Democracy
in Europe

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As a young New York-based Turkish political and legal thinker, Turkuler Isiksel offers the right mix of distance and proximity to ask Europe severe and yet engaging questions. Her contribution is a warm plea for the European Union to go beyond the mere language of trade, prosperity and profits to articulate its deep political values: liberty, democracy, justice and equality. To her it is the only way to overcome a moral crisis in today's European politics and regain people's confidence in it.

At this moment, the European Union expresses its ambitions in materialistic and commercial terms, summarized in GDP figures - not something to get excited about or enchanted by. We have forgotten that in the spirit of the EU's founders the economy was just a means to an end. Men like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman chose to build a market, step by step, with the aim of building peace. As Isiksel shows, their pragmatism was, perhaps unwittingly, based on the eighteenth-century conviction that peace will come through trade (a point also made by Pierre Rosanvallon in this volume). Nations that are trading with each other would have no reason to make war, Montesquieu, Hume and other Enlightenment thinkers believed. Although nowadays war is most improbable within Europe, in the financial crisis tensions among creditor and debtor nations have risen to unprecedented heights and nationalism is back. The dream of commercial peace is worn out.

As Isiksel concludes her essay, in a voice that we may hear more often in the future: 'It is time to cast aside the providential narrative of a commercial peace, and to humbly acknowledge not only the fragility and contingency of the European project, but also the indispensability of robust civic commitment to steer it into the new century.'

THE DREAM OF COMMERCIAL PEACE¹

In bright moments and dark, European integration has variously been celebrated or eulogized as the belated fruit of Enlightenment political thought. In contrast to the nation-state, behind whose dignified façade of sovereignty lurk atavistic passions, the European Union is supposed to champion moral universalism against nationalism, individual liberty against tyranny, cooperation against conflict, and mutual trust against *raison d'état*.

If it indeed espouses these noble aims, the European Union has a peculiar way of going about achieving them. Unlike the Tower of Babel, elevated into the firmaments by the collective ingenuity of diverse peoples, European integration is a horizontal edifice, uniting nations by tearing down border posts, dismantling barriers to economic mobility, smoothing over national regulatory idiosyncrasies, and harmonizing market-related policies across member states. Not only does the vast majority of the EU's legislative output pertain to the economic sphere, but being most strongly associated in the public imagination with a common currency, free trade, investment and market competition, its contribution to civic discourse is a bleak vocabulary of material value. The promise of ever-increasing affluence that has guided the integration process is hardly the stuff of inspired idealism.

To be sure, the dream of European unity did not originate as a commercial venture. The fact that it has ended up as one is the result of a shrewd strategic choice by a group of committed Europeanists led by French statesmen Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. Chastened by the failure of the grand federalist projects during the immediate postwar period, Monnet famously pushed his Plan B of incremental integration, delib-

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erately avoiding contentious areas of state sovereignty in favour of low-key cooperation among member states. At the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), Monnet conceded that 'increased coal and steel produc-

tion is not the basis of our civilization',² but endorsed it as the modest vehicle of a gradual 'fusion of interests'.³ Politically fraught questions would be taken off the table until such time as they would be resolved effortlessly thanks to the relentless march of integration in other, less controversial policy areas. Even the clinical-sounding word 'supranationalism' was itself a product of this particular strategy:⁴ unlike the terminology of federation, state and union, it was not readily associated with any existing political form at the time of its coinage, and was therefore less likely to generate a potentially disruptive debate about *finalité politique*.

By the end of the 1950s, the original six member states had broadened the sectoral terms of their union to full-scale market integration. A technocratic endeavour on the face of it, the project of building a common market provided a warrant for virtually unlimited supranational action, steadily taking on governance functions hitherto left to national legislatures and executives. To be sure, the member states themselves either initiated, or tacitly or expressly approved these transfers of sovereignty at each turn, but the net result was to bundle more and more policy areas under the canopy of supranational competence. In return, member states were promised value-neutral, competent administration in areas of public policy that they could not govern as effectively acting alone. French statesman Robert Marjolin, who served as a member of the inaugural European Commission, declared early on that 'a Community conscience, a common enthusiasm for Europe' would not look like traditional forms of political allegiance based on identity and

attachment, but would rather 'find its justification in the improvement of the living conditions of its inhabitants'.⁵

THE EUROPEAN COMMON MARKET: A VISIONARY IDEA?

As Joseph Weiler has noted, Monnet's plan for European integration aimed not so much at the extinction of national sovereignty as at its transformation.⁶ It would teach member states to redefine their identity and interests as members of a community of values and aspirations. A staunch believer in the transformative power of institutions, which he described as 'the true corner-stones of civilization',⁷ Monnet reasoned that the practice of acting in concert would curb, and perhaps cure, the solipsism and belligerent impulses of peoples organized into states. Just as nation-states had once wrapped their peoples in cocoons of fear, animosity and protectionism, he predicted that the 'pooling of their resources [would] eliminate suspicion and distrust' between them.⁸ Economic interdependence would lead states out of their war-prone history into a more rational, inclusive and peaceful future. Although the selling point of supranational governance was framed in terms of the material advantages it would provide for member states and their citizens, the founding generation regarded the common market as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself.

That cliché about European integration bringing the Enlightenment to fruition thus turns out to be correct, but in a rather unexpected sense. It is not the familiar rallying cries of that revolutionary era (among them, liberty, equality, solidarity and popular sovereignty), but the hallmark eighteenth-century faith in commerce and a providential belief in its civilizing and pacifying power that guide the European Union. Thinkers from Montesquieu to David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Benjamin Constant (though notably rejected by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexander

Hamilton) predicted that the growing mobility of capital, commodities and currency would have salutary political consequences for both domestic and international affairs.⁹ Summing up his 'doux commerce thesis', Montesquieu famously wrote that, among nations, 'The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace. Two nations that trade with each other become reciprocally dependent; if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling, and all unions are founded on mutual needs.'¹⁰ Surveying European history to vindicate Montesquieu's insight, Scots historian William Robertson concluded in 1766 that 'Commerce tends to wear off those prejudices which maintain distinction and animosity between nations. It softens and polishes the manners of men. It unites them, by one of the strongest of all ties, the desire of supplying their mutual wants.'¹¹ For his part, Adam Smith characterized the mechanism of commercial exchange as a form of 'persuasion', reasoning that 'the offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest.'¹² To each of these thinkers, commerce represented a triumph of reason over violence, persuasion over compulsion, and urbane universalism over belligerent tribalism. In Hume's words, '*industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together, by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and... the more luxurious ages.*'¹³

Rejecting protectionism as a goad to armed conflict, many eighteenth-century thinkers believed that economic exchange would lead to rising levels of affluence, which in turn would discipline and rationalize the use of sovereign power. Calculations of economic interest would take precedence over displays of military might. States would seek advantage through encouraging private industry, investment and trade, rather than by dispossessing their subjects and pillaging their neighbours' wealth. Kant argued that 'trade between nations' had been the initial mechanism by which 'nations first entered into *peaceful relations* with one another, and thus achieved mutual understanding, communi-

ty of interests, and peaceful relations, even with the most distant of their fellows.'¹⁴ Looking ahead to an age of growing global commercial interdependence, he speculated that 'eventually, war... becomes not only a highly artificial undertaking, extremely uncertain in its outcome for both parties, but also a very dubious risk to take.'¹⁵ Going beyond many of his contemporaries, Kant ventured that trade would not only prevent violent conflict, but would also impel states to enter into a federal union, not out of a sense of moral duty, but because only a federation could guarantee lawful behaviour on the part of their neighbours, allies and rivals.¹⁶ The competitive desire to gain economic advantage, Kant thought, would drive states to accept the authority of a cosmopolitan legal order that they would otherwise defy.

In attributing a causal force to economic interdependence, Kant's speculative account of history anticipates Monnet's Plan B for European integration to a remarkable degree. Reconceived as a scheme of a commercial peace, Monnet's alternative to the failed federalist blueprints required only minimal principled commitment on the part of member states. In fact, it allowed them to pursue their economic advantage and jealously guard their sovereign prerogatives until the imperatives of the market led them seamlessly into political union. As Romano Prodi observed during his tenure as President of the European Commission, 'The genius of the founding fathers lay in translating extremely high political ambitions, which were present from the beginning, into a series of more specific, almost technical decisions. This indirect approach made further action possible... From confrontation we moved to a willingness to cooperate in the economic sphere and then on to integration.'¹⁷

Although it is credited with shrewd pragmatism, much of which it surely deserves, Monnet's blueprint of economically motivated integration is no less utopian than the starry-eyed federalist projects of the immediate postwar period. It is also far more sanguine in its estimation of the consequences of economic interdependence than the Enlighten-

ment thinkers who inspired it. In the intervening two centuries, the waves of convulsive violence caused by colonialism, exploitation and slavery have conclusively discredited any providential faith in commerce as a pacific social force in and of itself. Even without the benefit of such hindsight, eighteenth-century thinkers nevertheless cautioned against the inherent ruthlessness of the drive for profits. Kant himself brooded that a cosmopolitan world order could only emerge after 'many devastations, upheavals, and even complete inner exhaustion of [states'] powers.'¹⁸ Others, including Adam Smith, joined Kant in rejecting the idea that commercial interaction is inherently peaceful, warning against 'the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers, who neither are, nor ought to be, the rulers of mankind'.¹⁹ Perhaps most importantly, they insisted on the primacy of wise political rule for managing the destructive effects of commerce, and rejected the idea that the latter could substitute for the former.

THE LIMITATIONS OF ECONOMIC PRESCRIPTIONS

After nearly seven decades of economic integration in Europe, the danger of armed conflict among member states has all but disappeared, leading many observers to applaud the prescience of the *doux commerce* thesis. However, as Kant would be the first to point out, peace must be a more demanding ideal than the mere absence of war; otherwise, it is just a ceasefire. Here, however, we see the European dream fraying. Far from seamlessly resolving the political questions of integration, economic interdependence and the concomitant expansion of supranational power have presented them with renewed urgency. No episode in recent memory better illustrates the limitations of addressing political conflict with economic prescription than the EU's woeful indifference to the social toll taken by the euro crisis since 2009. The harsh prescription of austerity handed down by creditor nations has generated poverty, privation, homelessness and chronic unemployment in Greece and

Spain in particular. More to the point, it is the project of economic interdependence itself, specifically the health of the monetary union, that is cited as the higher imperative that justifies the suffering of vulnerable citizens in member states burdened by debt. Furthermore, conflict over the social and distributional consequences of monetary union has not only brought the monetary union to the brink of dissolution, but has also tapped into gushing subterranean veins of nationalist animus. It turns out that decades of economic interdependence have merely papered over the nationalist bedrock.

Labouring under the guise of non-ideological and value-neutral governance, European integration has thwarted the possibility of building a European civic sphere by simply denying the need for it. Insofar as its democratic potential has been stunted by a single-minded focus on economic prosperity, the European Union illustrates the broader predicament of political life in affluent democracies today. As the eminent European historian Tony Judt pointed out in a 2009 essay, many Western societies exhibit a pathology of public discourse that reduces just about any question of public policy to one of profitability. Judt calls this monomaniacal value system 'economism':²⁰

'For the last thirty years, in much of the English-speaking world (though less so in continental Europe and elsewhere), when asking ourselves whether we support a proposal or initiative, we have not asked, is it good or bad? Instead we inquire: Is it efficient? Is it productive? Would it benefit gross domestic product? Will it contribute to growth? This propensity to avoid moral considerations, to restrict ourselves to issues of profit and loss – economic questions in the narrowest sense – is not an instinctive human condition. It is an acquired taste.'

Judt fears, rightly, that we are fast losing our ability to evaluate political ideals, institutions and policies except in terms of their economic value.

Economic quanta such as revenue, growth, employment or private wealth are not treated as one vector of the public interest, but increasingly as the only vector that citizens and leaders are willing to consider. This narrowing of public debate comes at the expense of principles such as popular self-rule, individual liberty, justice and equality; in other words, the other ideals for which the Enlightenment stood besides commerce. In the US in particular, proposals about how to address issues of high moral salience such as wealth inequality, childhood poverty, quality healthcare and education, mass incarceration, policing tactics, to name a few, are commonly evaluated in financial terms rather than in terms of whether they are the right thing to do. This attitude is gradually permeating European societies as well. Like wealthy corporations who nickel and dime their lowest earning employees, the most affluent societies on the planet can be ruthlessly frugal in tackling serious social problems, in part because they have come to prioritize cost-effectiveness over ideals of fairness, equality of opportunity, civic cohesion and individual self-respect. Illustrating this tendency throughout the euro crisis, creditor countries and institutions have insisted on the timely repayment of loans by debtor states, even at the cost of wearing away the social safety net on which millions of their citizens depend. What was once the hallmark of postwar European civilization is now viewed as an obstacle to the operation of the market. The means have become the ends.

BRINGING THE EUROPEAN PROJECT BACK TO ITS CITIZENS

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the impoverishment of our political discourse is accompanied by literal impoverishment. The attempt to replace political debate with the false certainty of economic prescription and to articulate the value of European integration simply in terms of material gains has proved tragically self-defeating. What contemporary polity is capable of delivering uninterrupted economic prosperity, par-

ticularly in the turgid world of casino capitalism? As long as the European Union means little more to its citizens than a marriage of convenience – a union for richer, but not for poorer – every economic crisis is bound to throw into doubt its continued existence. The most urgent order of business for member states and EU citizens, therefore, is to find ways of articulating the value of European integration in terms other than the economic. If they are unable to do so, no grand gesture of political unity, no display of symbols, flags, flashy buildings, crisp banknotes or self-congratulatory holidays can make up for the absence of a prolific, passionate, diverse and even cacophonous European public that takes pride in the political, and not merely commercial, bonds of its union.

It is ultimately impossible not to admire the triumph of a commercial peace in Europe. It is, however, equally impossible not to acknowledge its firm limitations. Monnet's gambit of presenting supranational governance as a shared commercial venture may have protected the fledgling European Communities against being riven by the political divisions among member states, but it has also alienated the integration project from citizens. The strategy of insulating the European project from the vicissitudes of democratic politics has only managed to postpone the inevitable reintrusion of politics into the supranational scene in embittered and disaffected form. Having been excluded from the decisions that shaped ever-closer union, European publics are now contesting the arrogance of technocracy by professing dismissive Euroscepticism, resentful populism and virulent xenophobia. The lesson here is that democratic politics can only be circumvented at the cost of anti-democratic politics. Ultimately, however, 'politics cannot be taken out of politics'.²¹ If anything, the intensification of interdependence among member states has made the

'Having been excluded from the decisions that shaped ever-closer union, European publics are now contesting the arrogance of technocracy by professing dismissive Euroscepticism, resentful populism and virulent xenophobia.'

question of the Union's *finalité politique* unavoidable, and has established that it cannot be resolved by the immanent logic of market-building. It is time to cast aside the providential narrative of a commercial peace, and to humbly acknowledge not only the fragility and contingency of the European project, but also the indispensability of robust civic commitment to steer it into the new century.

- 1 Parts of this essay draw on Turkuler Isiksel, *Europe's Functional Constitution: A Theory of Constitutionalism Beyond the State* (forthcoming).
- 2 Jean Monnet, Speech to the Common Assembly of the ECSC, Strasbourg, 12 January 1953, in *The United States of Europe Has Begun. The European Coal and Steel Community Speeches and Addresses 1952-1954* (Paris: 1955) University of Pittsburgh Archive of European Integration, microfiche, p. 17.
- 3 Robert Schuman, *Declaration of 9 May 1950*.
- 4 Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004 [1958]), p. 32.
- 5 Quoted in Willem Maas, *Creating European Citizens* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), pp. 19-20.
- 6 Joseph H. H. Weiler, 'The Transformation of Europe', *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 100 (1991), pp. 2403-83, at pp. 2479-80.
- 7 Monnet, Speech to the Common Assembly of the ECSC, in *The United States of Europe Has Begun*, p. 16.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 9 The famous phrase is adapted from Montesquieu's not-unequivocal observation in Part IV, Book XX, Chapter 1 of *The Spirit of the Laws* that commerce 'polishes and softens [*adoucit*] barbarous mores'. 'It is almost a general rule,' Montesquieu writes, 'that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores.' Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1748, 1758] 1989), p. 338. The term '*doux commerce*' thesis to characterize this line of thinking in eighteenth-century thought (and beyond) was popularized by Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).
- 10 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 338.
- 11 William Robertson, 'A View of the Progress of Society in Europe,' [1766]. Reprinted in Henry C. Clark (ed.), *Commerce, Culture, & Liberty: Readings on Capitalism before Adam Smith* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), p. 506.
- 12 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), (A) p. 352; see also (B) pp. 493-4.
- 13 David Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2006), emphasis original.
- 14 Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch', in *Political Writings*, 2nd edn with an introduction by Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 111.
- 15 Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View' [1784], in *Political Writings*, p. 51.
- 16 As Kant writes, the mechanism of unsocial sociability which obtains among states as well as individuals ensures that 'the antagonism of their hostile attitudes will make them compel one another to submit to coercive laws', that is to say, 'selfish inclinations... can be used by reason to facilitate... the reign of established right'. Kant, 'Perpetual Peace,' p. 113.
- 17 Prodi goes on to argue that this method of incremental integration had reached its natural limits, arguing in favour of a 'political Europe' while disclaiming any 'wish to discuss the final form which the Union should take'. Romano Prodi, 'For a Strong Europe, with a Grand Design and the Means of Action'. Speech delivered at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Paris, 29 May 2001. Available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-01-244_en.htm
- 18 Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History', p. 47.
- 19 In his Augustinian moods, Adam Smith thus condemned profit-seeking as an ugly triumph of *libido domi-nandi*. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 527.
- 20 Tony Judt, 'What Is Living and What Is Dead in Social Democracy?', *The New York Review of Books*, 17 December 2009. Available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/dec/17/what-is-living-and-what-is-dead-in-social-democrac/?pagination=false>
- 21 Giovanni Sartori, 'Constitutionalism: A Preliminary Discussion', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 56 (December 1962), no. 4, pp. 853-64, at p. 864.