

Challenges for the European Union and ASEAN: the problematic of the community of citizens

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Since the economic crisis and the implementation of austerity measures under the "There Is No Alternative" neoliberalist mantra, many European nations saw a devaluation of their welfare state and many European citizens experiencing a progressive precarization of their socio-economic situation. Such communities suffered a moment of rupture and entered a process of re-identification that gave opportunity to Eurosceptic and nationalistic sentiments to rise in several countries of Europe. The refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks linked to Daesh only contributed to create an "insecurity syndrome", at a time when many European communities were rethinking and redefining their grounds. This search of an inscription into a new identity based on a nostalgia of the past and an attempt to dismantle the trends initiated with globalization. This article will analyze the current difficulties for a European community of citizens and the European project itself, and will be put in contrast with the problems faced by the ASEAN project itself.

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After the financial crisis, Europe has seen how populist movements of Eurosceptic character emerged in several countries of the European Union (EU), placing the integration project at risk. Other factors such as the austerity measures imposed, the refugee crisis or the terrorist attacks also contributed to strengthening populist movements of different ideologies. The last examples of it have been seen in France, Italy, Austria or Germany, but probably the clearer example of Euroscepticism was the one of the United Kingdom and the 'Brexit'. The ASEAN economic community also faces its own challenges but seems to have in common with the EU the difficulty to create a united community with a common identity. This article will analyze the current difficulties for a European community of citizens and the European project itself and will be put in contrast with the problems faced by the ASEAN project itself.

The problem of the European citizenship

After the crisis erupted in 2008, many European citizens experienced a progressive loss of social rights and salaries, suffered unemployment and a negative perception of the future settled down among broad layers of the population. The refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks linked to *Daesh* or *Al Qaeda* did not contribute to calm the spirits at a time when many European communities were rethinking and redefining their grounds, approaching a moment of rupture. That gave an opportunity to nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments to rise extensively in several countries of Europe for the

first time since the end of World War II. It could be argued that it was a social response seeking to recover -or protect- the old national identities, in order to strengthen ties that hold the community together and could allow those communities to defend their lost prosperity -or the visualization of that loss in the near futures. As would be put by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy,[1] this kind of nationalist tendencies full of nostalgia led to the construction of images of the past 'disregarding the realities', just for the sake of constructing in the present an idealistic 'original community' of 'immanent' values that arguably existed previously. It is worth mentioning that the opinion of Nancy was that we should remain suspicious of this kind of movement.



Photo by Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado[caption]

This search of an inscription into a new identity -which is paradoxically a very old one, is a response in line with the fear of the difference, of the 'otherness', which supposes a burden for constructive political openness and the survival of the European project. Indeed, we have already seen how these chauvinist movements have already acted against constitutional liberalism through a direct attack to the rule-of-law, essential for the functioning of Western democracies, in countries like Poland and Hungary. Paradoxically, at the time that these reactionary forces advocate for nationalism and illiberal policies -against multiculturalism, economic redistribution, freedom of speech or rights of the opposition- are violating the same Enlightenment values that they claim to defend.

The turn inward nationalism could be seen as a consequence of the lack of a strong 'European citizenship' acting as a unifying element among citizens of different European nation-states. Étienne Balibar mentions that this overarching citizenship seemed for him 'impossible' to realize but, however, 'it is necessary because the steps that have already been covered leave no room, except in the form of a disaster, for turning backward or even halting at a status quo'.[2] European values

cannot be abandoned in order to protect them, as then the pursued community would be equally dismantled. The search of an inscription into a new identity based on a nostalgia of the past supposes a reactionary halt to the project of European citizenship and, consequently, to the progression of the EU. The only solution to reverse this trend and keep alive the Western political culture of liberal democracy seems to be through more integration and further union, with increased solidarity, general wellbeing, and equality among all European citizens.

Why have the European Union halted the process of integration?

In 2017 Emmanuel Macron was elected President of the French Republic, after establishing the reforms of the EU as a key pillar of his political agenda. The transformation promoted by him towards a 'Europe that protects' responded to the civil unrest and the rise of populism in the shape of both extreme right nationalist parties and radical left ones, exemplified by the 'National Front' and 'La France Insoumise' in France, respectively. However, his plans were once again immobilized by the opposition of Germany as the main obstacle, together with other countries of the North and East of the EU. [3]

The opposition of Germany and other North European countries is not new and has traditionally happened due to at least three reasons. The first one would be the economic advantages obtained by these countries on behalf of the Southern and 'poorer' ones. For instance, the fact of having lost their own national currency makes impossible for these countries suffering economic hardships to resort to devaluation, what rests competitiveness to the least industrialized and less productive countries while favours others like Germany, since the Euro makes its products economically more competitive than what they would be with the old and appreciated German Mark.[4] It is well known that the machinery of Brussels has been traditionally very friendly to Germany and its economic interests,[5] and Germany has taken advantage of capital flight[6] and qualified human capital flight[7] from peripheral countries to Germany at times of crisis, as well as enjoyed a large trade surplus harmful to the euro-zone economy. This surplus, while has been repeatedly denounced by the European Union institutions and other member-states as harmful[8] and the biggest problem for the eurozone[9], has never been corrected so far. Economic integration without fair regulations, in case of crisis, means that richer countries take advantage over the poorer ones without any commitment for solidarity.

The second reason would be the traditional emphasis of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, about the importance of the 'individual responsibility' and the 'national efforts' of EU countries, especially regarding socioeconomic aspects.[10] This approach does not take into account that the current economic status of Germany and other rich European countries does not depend on their own performance alone, but it is highly influenced by the fact of belonging to the EU and the advantages it brings attached for them. The lack of solidarity among citizens of richer countries, that press their governments against contributing with their taxes to help 'lazy' Southern countries. This goes in line with the lack of a 'European citizenship' that could grant some strong 'sense of shared identity and national duty' that could sustain solidarity among citizens of different countries, as was seen among citizens of West Germany with those of East Germany after reunification.[11] As third and last reason, the pressure exerted by nationalist movements in many Northern and Eastern European countries seeking for more sovereignty and less integration into the EU. An example of this trend would be the 'Brexit', but also the Euroscepticism of countries like Poland and Hungary,

and the political tendency towards the extreme-right policies that extremist parties create in traditional parties previously more centered, as would be the case in Germany.

At the same time, in Southern countries like Portugal, Spain, Italy or Greece, the emergence of the crisis showed a weak economic position and a lack of prevision by their governments, bringing a rise in the debt rates that had to be paid to make it attractive and be able to capture new debt to refinance the old one. While mainly Northern European countries like Germany received the capital flight from the Southern countries, the latter saw themselves pushed towards the European policy of austerity led by the richer countries. It was a consequence of what the German economist Wolfgang Streek describes as the 'Hayakization' of European capitalism that neoliberalism brought since the 1980s: the EU became a federation neutralizing the democratic institutions on the economy while handing power to 'the market'.^[12] This policy transformed the Southern European member-states into 'permanent losers in order to make it possible for the winners of market expansion', always available to provide cheap labour and be a loyal market of consumption, but it never translated into 'transfers' to 'compensate them' for their role of losers in the EU.^[13] Since the economic crisis and the implementation of austerity measures under the neoliberalist mantra of 'There Is No Alternative', many European nations saw a devaluation of their welfare state, with many European citizens experiencing a progressive loss of social rights and salaries, suffering unemployment and even losing their homes to the banks that their own taxes were helping to rescue. Soon enough, left-wing populist parties emerged as a consequence of the broad social unrest caused by the economic grievances and the neoliberal system; often, also against the EU and the austerity policies hard-pressed by Germany. In that context, the European integration and the project of 'European citizenship' were more impossible than ever.

The ASEAN impossibility of community

Contrary to the EU, the ASEAN countries do not 'enjoy' the relatively homogeneous ethnic and cultural -also religious- nation-states. The multicultural nation-states of Southeast Asia required a 'union in cultural diversity', exactly the motto of the 'Declaration on ASEAN Unity in Cultural Diversity: Towards Strengthening ASEAN community', back in 2011.^[14] This declaration was laying the foundations for 'realizing an ASEAN Community that is people-centered and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN by forging a common identity'. That common identity is what we have just seen as the main shortcoming of the EU. For some time it was thought that ASEAN could help the EU 'in developing strategies for social inclusion as well as preventing radicalization and inter-ethnic conflict,'^[15] but recently the reality of the events showed that both organizations are facing similar troubles.

The ASEAN multicultural societies are now at a serious moment of stress, with religious and/or ethnic conflicts in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and, especially, Myanmar, where 'the Rohingya humanitarian crisis has already caused tensions between ASEAN members'.^[16] In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, ethnic tensions are rising before elections, specifically the anti-Chinese sentiments. Moreover, the internal conflicts and the ethnic nationalisms could undermine the commitment to regional integration, similarly as it is occurring in the EU. The case of ASEAN could be even more complex, as economic inequalities among countries are even more prominent and the handicap of religious alignment deepens the problem.

When a society is faced with political and economic tensions, the risk of fracture increases and populism easily emerges[17]. The reason could be found in the disappearance of the consciousness of 'constitutional patriotism'[18] and the cosmopolitan solidarity that it brings attached, giving place to the emergence of reactionary ethnic sentiments. However, on the one hand, while in the case of the EU the tradition of liberal democracy works as an alleged 'common political culture' in favour of integration, in the ASEAN community different political systems merge without any kind of common ground or historical tradition, making it harder to pursue an ideal 'common common' for shared sovereignty, needed for the project of a regional single market based upon several freedoms: free flow of goods, services, and investment, as well as skilled labour and capital.[19] On the other hand, without agreements that ensure a compensation to the most disadvantaged countries for their role as 'eternal losers', and in the case that the regional single market in ASEAN eventually proceeds in the same way as that of the EU, it could be expected that the same problematics will appear sooner or later: the countries with higher levels of economic development -like Singapore and Malaysia- would act as Germany did in Europe.

For a real union that pretends to promote a community with a 'common identity', any measure taken must be towards greater equality among the components of the treaty, not towards simple mere integration looking for an unregulated benefit for all: because it never comes evenly. If there is greater equality, greater integration would be a natural step of progress; but if there is only integration while inequalities increase, it will be a process that will almost certainly be reversed in the future. It could be argued that it should not be a win-win treaty, but a project in which the more developed countries, with leverage power in the negotiation, accept a smaller win while granting a greater win to the less developed countries. The small win for the powerful, great win for the weak, seems to be the only model that can maintain these kinds of unions in the long term. Exactly as the redistribution system in the liberal democracies works, those who get more benefits shall pay a larger share of taxes to compensate for the poor.

As Balibar mentions regarding the historical consolidation of the nation-form, 'without an "economic and social dimension" and more precisely without a dimension of economic and social *democracy*, consisting in rights of redistribution and participation in "public services", supported by institutions and practices of negotiation and conflict, the representation of a "community of citizens" of the national form could never have been maintained...'[20]. Hence, if the EU or ASEAN pretend to advance in the path of integration, they should follow the same path that the nation-form followed to establish itself as a means for solidarity and common citizenship. Of course, this proposal will have to overcome the problem of 'the reduction of multiplicity to unity' and the fact that there is not a strict 'common common' for all the actors involved. The 'common good' is a controversial tool able to accommodate the interests of the elites, or the dictatorship of the majority, but the future of these overarching citizenship projects resides on the unselfishness of those elites and those majorities with the possibility to be solitary.

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