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SHOULD THE EUROPEAN UNION BECOME MORE DEMOCRATIC ?

in *Democracy and the European Union*, A. Follesdal & P. Koslowski eds,
Berlin & New York: Springer, 1997, 287-301.

Can a democratic deficit ever be a good thing?

Does the European Union suffer from a democratic deficit?* The answer clearly depends on what exactly counts as a "democratic deficit", and hence also on what counts as "democracy".

Democracy is frequently linked to accountability (for example, in this volume, by Gustavsson and by Schmitter), roughly understood as the need for decision-makers to justify their decisions in a persuasive way, or more explicitly as the conjunction of transparency (the provision of all relevant information to the controlling party) and responsibility (the serious risk of being sanctioned by that party). But there can be democracy without accountability – as in direct democracy, where the people are themselves the rulers –, and there can be accountability without democracy – when the controlling party to whom accounts need to be given does not ultimately consist in the people of the entity concerned, but a foreign ruler for example. Leaving out the possibility – irrelevant on the scale of the EU – of generalized

* I am most grateful to the participants in the Oslo workshop on "Democracy and the European Union" and in the Louvain workshop on "The normative foundations of federalism" for stimulating exchanges, and to Renaud Dehousse for instructive written comments on an earlier version.

direct democracy, democracy should therefore be characterized, more specifically, as accountability to the demos, i.e. to the people expressing themselves through majorities emerging from free elections under universal suffrage.

If this is democracy, what is a democratic deficit? At the most abstract level, a democratic deficit is sometimes understood as less than maximal feasible democracy, and at other times as less than optimal democracy.¹ Under the former construal, it makes sense to ask whether a democratic deficit is a bad thing which one should attempt to get rid of. Under the latter construal, it does not, as a democratic deficit – on a par, presumably, with a democratic surplus – is by definition suboptimal. Whether there is a democratic deficit in the former sense is easily settled, as it is obvious enough that the complex amalgam consisting of the European Commission, the European Council, the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, the European Court of Justice, the European Monetary Institute and their respective administrations is quite a bit less than maximally accountable to the relevant demos. The sheer opacity of many decision processes within the Commission's administration, the constant reliance on expert committees, the weakness of the democratic control over the activity of the European Council, the Council of Ministers and the European Commission – whether because of their mode of selection or because of the lack of a genuine arena for political debate – uncontroversially establish the existence of a democratic deficit understood as less than maximal democracy.²

¹ For my purposes, these abstract definitions are more appropriate than the common characterization of the democratic deficit in the EU context as a loss of democratic accountability at the national level unmatched by a corresponding gain of democratic accountability at the European level (see e.g. Dehousse 1995, Scharpf 1995, Gustavsson 1996). If there is a democratic deficit in this specific sense, it is nearly self-evident that there is also a democratic deficit in my first abstract sense ("less than maximal"), but by no means certain that there is also one in my second sense ("less than optimal").

² See Dehousse (1995: 8-13) for a useful overview of the various dimensions of the "democratic deficit" in this sense.

But they do not ipso facto show that there is also a democratic deficit in the second sense – a suboptimal level of democracy. For whether there is such a deficit depends on what criterion of optimality one adopts, and this criterion cannot plausibly be, as a general rule, maximal democratic accountability. Why not? Let me just mention two possible sources of discrepancy. For reasons related to the general case for a separation between the judiciary power and the legislative power, it is arguably essential that the European Court of Justice should be sheltered from accountability to any demos. For reasons rooted in an analysis of the causes and effects of inflationary pressures, it is also arguably essential that the prospective European Bank should be an independent agency protected against political pressures. So, if optimal democratic accountability is not maximal democratic accountability, what is it? My answer is ruthlessly, unapologetically consequentialist.³

Ruthless consequentialism

More explicitly, my claim is that the very existence of the European Union, the powers it is given and the way it is organized must be evaluated, criticized, shaped, on the basis of the conjunction of empirical conjectures about the likely consequences of alternative options and of a normative criterion for assessing these consequences. What should this criterion be? It should certainly incorporate considerations of security and prosperity – the two central concerns in the first two decades of the European Communities –, but also of sustainability, diversity and solidarity. Can these considerations be integrated into an explicit, coherent and plausible conception of the overall goal? I believe they can, and have tried to systematically spell out and defend such a conception in Real Freedom for All (Van Parijs 1995a). Being able to rely on a

³ Like Malnes's answer in this volume, but unlike Midgaard's, whose criterion of autonomy (everybody should be ruled by laws adopted by himself or his representatives) defines optimality by the extent to which the decision-making design satisfies some procedural feature, not the extent to which it fosters the achievement of some substantive goal. The purely instrumental approach to democracy on which I rely here is presented and defended more fully in Van Parijs (1996a)

precise conception of this type presents great advantages. But only a recognition of the relevance of the broad set of considerations articulated in this conception, not the particular way in which it articulates them, is assumed in the argument which I am now about to present, by way of an answer to the question whether or not the European Union suffers from a democratic deficit.

The question can be rephrased as follows. If the overarching goal is the maximal feasible achievement of some substantive conception of social justice which incorporates the various considerations listed above, is there any strong reason to believe that the EU's current institutional situation is unsatisfactory and, if so, that enhancing the EU's democratic accountability would make things better, as far as the achievement of our overall goal is concerned.

No option but going forward

Is the status quo satisfactory? Certainly not. Most fundamentally because the very existence of the single European market, added to the globalization of the economy, jeopardizes sustainability, the persistence of cultural diversity and, above all, the preservation and strengthening of solidarity.⁴ To clarify what I have in mind, let me just briefly illustrate this last dimension. At the national level, we used to be able to exert our solidarity in a variety of ways. For example, when publicly run bus services needed new buses, they could self-evidently select the single bus-manufacturing firm on its territory, perhaps quite a bit more expensive than alternatives abroad, but providing employment to a large number of workers, and hence the rational choice, since the cost of unemployment benefits would far exceed the premium paid to the local firm. Moreover, state-owned firms or state-protected monopolies used to contain massive pockets of unprofitable activities and to apply rigid wage scales largely disconnected from any assessment of worker's actual productivity, thus implementing a large, though implicit solidarity in favour of the low-skilled. As a result of the policing of public orders and the dismantling of monopolies by EU legislation, these two forms of solidarity are no longer available.

⁴ In comparison, the threat to security that stems from globalization (via the growth of the extreme right), as emphasized in Malnes's "Hobbesian" contribution, appears rather modest.

Never mind, one might say, all we need is replace these inefficient, untidy, implicit forms of solidarity by more efficient, systematic, transparent transfers to the unlucky and the less talented, through our tax and social security systems. But you then face another problem. For if in order to finance unemployment benefits or employment subsidies you attempt to impose high taxes or social security contributions on those firms, or on those owners of financial or human capital, who earn handsome incomes among other things because of the opportunities offered by the Single Market and globalization, then you soon realize that many of them move out – or credibly threaten to move out – to places where they face lower tax rates while retaining for their products unhindered access to the home market.

Consequently, both because of ongoing changes in the external economic environment ("globalization") and because of the gradual unfolding of the legal, economic and organizational implications of the single market, we cannot stop where we are. Since there is much to lose from going back to more autarkic economies, as well as from attempting to restore the inefficient and biased forms of solidarity illustrated above, we have no serious option but to move forward, by greatly increasing the powers of the European Union in matters that are directly and explicitly of a distributive nature. On the background of the diagnosis just sketched, this is required even in order to preserve current levels of solidarity within each member state.⁵ It is obviously also required if

⁵ Scharpf (1995: 565-81) essentially shares this diagnosis, but he is rather pessimistic about the EU's political ability to remedy the national powerlessness brought about by the Single Market. His pessimism is rooted in the legal asymmetry between "negative integration" (the effective dismantling of discriminating legislation by the Commission and the Court) and "positive integration" (the laborious EU-level re-regulation by unanimous Council decisions), in the conflicting interests of member states with a developed and a rudimentary welfare state, in the ideological disagreement among the former group, and in the great institutional differences between social protection and industrial relations in the various countries. At the most fundamental level, these difficulties must be tackled through a combination of the political-institutional strategy sketched below and a basic-security approach to European social integration sketched elsewhere (Van Parijs 1996b). These need

one regards as desirable to strengthen solidarity across member states. And it is further required to secure sustainability – against downward environmental competition –, to generate sufficient human capital – against the downward spiral of free riding on the education and training provided by other countries – and even to protect diversity – against the homogenizing pressure of a mad dash for competitiveness.

A more democratic Union ?

Granted that we need a more powerful Union for the reasons just mentioned, do we also need a more democratic Union? Let me say at the outset that I do not believe that this issue can be settled on the basis of a simple dichotomy between efficiency-oriented policies, which require no democratic accountability and can therefore be left to the Union as it is, and redistribution-oriented policies, which do require democratic accountability and should therefore be left under the control of the national demos.⁶ Competition policy and monetary policy may be efficiency-motivated but they have massive distributive implications, and should therefore not be exempted, according to this very position, from democratic scrutiny. Deliberately redistributive policies, on the other hand, cannot be left, for the reasons just sketched, at the national level. Given this massive distributive relevance, should European policy-making, whether old and new, therefore be made more democratic than it now is? Not necessarily. From the consequentialist perspective sketched earlier, the real question is rather how all relevant actors – rulers, officials, representatives, pressure groups and even voters – can be given the powers and the incentives to do the right thing, i.e. to do what is needed (given what the others do) for the best possible decisions to be made, as far as the achievement of social justice is concerned.

In the case of monetary policy hinted at before, this may well involve shielding the governors of the prospective European Bank against democratic

not be incompatible with the less radical, shorter-term measures favoured by Scharpf (ibid., 581-88).

⁶ As in a rather rash interpretation of Giandomenico Majone's (1996) position.

accountability. Such shielding would not be justified by some alleged distributive neutrality of monetary policy, but by the presumption that accelerating inflation and political business cycles would jeopardize the sustainable fostering of the fate of the worst off. But what about the deliberate redistributive policies, which I claimed the EU should take on far more than it does now? How should the relevant decision-making institutions be designed? Should they be any more democratic than EU institutions currently are?

One cannot offer a sensible answer to this question without first looking at how generous the redistributive policies of various existing polities are, especially federal ones, and reflecting on whether the observed differences have anything to do with the design of their respective political institutions. As part of this exercise, it will be important to think, for example, about the reasons why the U.S. welfare state is so much stingier than the typical West-European welfare state, despite comparable economic circumstances and a common cultural inheritance. Can this difference be attributed to greater internal heterogeneity, to the racial factor or to a greater openness to immigration, or rather to the presidential system, to the importance of money in the electoral process or to a majority system with large constituencies which prevents the underdogs from being represented in Congress?

From a casual exercise of this type, I derive the tentative conclusion that there is not much to expect from a European legislative body made up of representatives of the various governments – certainly if it is governed by a unanimity rule or by a wealth-weighted majority rule,⁷ slightly less certainly if it is governed by some unweighted or population-weighted majority rule. Why? Fundamentally because each government's representative at the intergovernmental table would be expected to bring back home at least the

⁷ As has apparently been suggested by President Chirac. Note that when the first European institutions were set up in 1951, Chancellor Adenauer was about to suggest that the weights in the European institutions should be determined according to the size of their coal and steel production, when Jean Monnet, immediately endorsed by Adenauer himself, proposed that each of the three larger countries (France, Germany, Italy) and the three smaller countries together (Belgium, Luxemburg, the Netherlands) should each have the same weight. (See Monnet 1976: 413-15.)

"juste retour", at least the equivalent of what (s)he is giving away, and the closer one gets to a purely distributive issue, the more likely possible moves are likely to be blocked by one (unanimity) or more (majority) countries whose interests are perceived to be damaged. Even if, under unweighted or population-weighted majority, there turned out to be enough countries to gain from the redistributive measure, they may well refrain from pushing their advantage for fear of creating alienation, frustration, indignation in the countries which stand to lose. It is only if the discussion could be sufficiently shielded from scrutiny by the national media, parliaments and electorates and/or if it could remain sufficiently ignorant or quiet about the transnational distributive consequences that the the governments' representatives would not lose face (and by the same token a few points in the opinion polls) if they returned home with a bad deal. But if it can only be purchased at the cost of such a large "democratic deficit", this possibility would unavoidably remain shaky, as it would falter should media attention suddenly seize the issue.

Single-constituency Parliament, public Council, elected President ?

Are things hopeless then? They need not be. But it is essential that the crucial legislative body should be made up not of the representatives of the various countries or their governments, but of subsets of their populations. The most obvious way of achieving this would consist in greatly extending the scope and strength of the legislative powers of the European Parliament, at least partly at the expense of the Council.⁸ This preference for the Parliament is by no means based on the fact that each country's representation and weight at the Parliament is far more sensitive to the size of its population than it is at the

⁸ This could probably be done most effectively by giving the Commission the power to propose legislation in the relevant area and the Parliament the power to approve, amend or reject it. By introducing co-decision by the Parliament and the Council of Ministers on some acts, by requiring Parliamentary approval of both the President and the members of the European Commission, by synchronizing (at a six-month interval) European elections and choice of a new Commission, the Maastricht Treaty has already gone quite a long way in this direction.

Council. Not only could this in principle easily be done at the Council too, as is actually put forward in some of the reform proposals made in preparation of the Intergovernmental Conference.⁹ But it is also, for our purposes, of rather minor importance. What matters is rather, first, that the representation should be structured along ideological or social rather than ethnic or territorial lines, so as to allow for alliance or indeed party formation across the national borders. What also matters greatly is, next, that the representation should not be significantly affected by wealth, whether as a result of making the number of representatives (per capita) a function of a nation's GNP (or some other correlated variable), of allowing campaign expenditure to significantly affect election outcomes or of the de facto or de jure disenfranchisement of a significant proportion of the poor.

This may not prove enough, however. For one key factor in explaining the viable generosity of European welfare states is bound to reside in the existence of a nation-wide forum of political argument and competition in which an appeal to the common interest, or to the interests of "the weakest among us all" can make sense. For something analogous to happen at the European level, despite linguistic barriers and cultural differences, more institutional help may be needed. One could, for example, imagine that a portion of the membership of the European Parliament, say 50 members, be chosen on Europe-wide lists, under a system of proportional representation with the possibility of multiple voting on each list.¹⁰ Featuring on such lists would be attractive to major politicians, as there has probably never been as large an electoral constituency anywhere (not even for the US Presidential election). More importantly, such a system would force candidates to acquire a European profile, and hence to care

⁹ For example in August 1993 by the German Member of Parliament Karl Lamers, who suggested that Council decisions be taken with a double majority of 4/5 of the member states and 4/5 of the populations they represent; or in February 1994 by the Institutional Committee of the European Parliament, who proposed a simple majority of both the member states and the populations represented by them. (See Franck 1995: 41 for a survey of relevant proposals.)

¹⁰ A (timid) step in this direction was made in Maastricht, when allowing each citizen of a member state to take part in European Parliament elections, whether as a voter or as a candidate, in any European country.

about as much about their presence and image in the press of other European countries as in their own. It would of course also force them to collaborate closely across national borders on the programme and make up of the list. As a result, even the candidates for the remaining, nationally allocated, seats (more than 90% of the total) would be far more closely connected cross-nationally than they currently are. Above all, the politicians' and the media's discourse will gradually be reshaped so as to construct "our" interest on a Europe-wide scale.¹¹

An alternative, less obvious and more hazardous way of pursuing the same objectives consists in modifying the other legislative bodies – European Council and Council of Ministers – in such a way that it can develop the same dynamic. One might think, for example of the radical conjunction of three changes: replacing unanimity by (not too qualified) majority, making the discussions public and adding, in the case of large or heterogeneous countries, representatives from their regional governments. This last element may be conceived in such a way that each country ends up with a weight that more or less reflects its population size. But this is not crucial.¹² What matters is that the

¹¹ An analogous proposal is to be found in Dewatripont & al. (1996: 17, 165-7) and in Roland & al. (1996). One may object that this pan-European list system does not guarantee representation from all areas and involves a strong bias in favour of politicians from larger countries. One might think of countering this (1) by imposing constraints on the national make up of each list and attaching significant consequences to someone's position on the list, or (2) by making votes attracted from outside one's country count more heavily for the individual candidate (not the list). More wisely perhaps, one can simply rely on the nationally allocated seats to guarantee representation from all nations (and even most regions), with some overrepresentation of the smaller ones (as now) to compensate the disadvantage their politicians may have on the Pan-European ballot.

¹² Indeed, making power a function of population size, for example by requiring a high qualified majority (4/5 as in the Lamers proposal mentioned earlier) of the populations represented, would be counterproductive from my standpoint, as it would give, or be near to giving) a veto power to the large

combination of these three changes would take us quite some way from the diplomatic logic of hidden bargaining to the parliamentary logic of public argument, analogous to the one that prevails in the German or Austrian Bundesrat, or even in the US Senate or the Swiss Conseil général (with the significant difference, however, that in the latter cases it is the voters, rather than the governments, of the federated units that are represented). However, the key element of cross-national alliance would be far more difficult to durably and strainlessly achieve under this set up, as there would be a tendency for representatives from various parts of the same country either to systematically gang up together or to bash the traitors who defect to the opponents. Moreover, no electoral competition for votes from other countries would be put into place. Hence the incentive to construct the interests one is mandated to defend as trans-national would remain weak and the rise of a Europe-wide debate would hardly be fostered.¹³

In order to achieve these further objectives, one could think of supplementing the reform of the Council – while disposing by the same token of its unsatisfactory rotating presidency – by having the President of the

countries, and thus take us back to the bargaining dynamics from which it is essential to break away.

¹³ Note that it is precisely because of the lack of such a debate that Sverker Gustavsson finds it justified to give the same voting power or at any rate a fairly equal voting power to each nation at the Council level, as well as to secure a position in the Commission to at least one person from each member state. The underlying concern is with getting all arguments properly listened to, rather than with giving due weight to the interests of all. I can see the point of this argument (a variant of which also underlies Dehousse's position, to be discussed below). But the solution it points to must be viewed as a poor and transitional Ersatz to building a well-functioning European public realm – an admittedly difficult task for which electoral reform of the type sketched above for the Parliament and the uninhibited acceptance of English as the medium of debate provide two important preconditions. Moreover, an "alarm bell mechanism" (see Dehousse 1994: 121-23), which makes it possible for the veto of a number of countries to postpone the decision (so as to give them time to make their case), would probably be a better tool for screening out fair arguments from sheer interests.

Council elected through a pan-European election.¹⁴ To prevent the contest from degenerating again into a divisive conflict between nations or groups or nations, one could restrict eligibility at each election to the citizens of particular countries, with a rotation among fairly equally populated groups of countries so that each of them has its turn, say, every 20 years. Here again, we would have major politicians forced to adopt a high European profile, enter a highly publicized Europe-wide debate, strengthen cross-national political alliances and above all compete with a platform that caters to the general interest (or to the interest "of the weakest among us all"), rather than to national interest. The experiment, however, may bring nothing but frustration if the elected President has no other power than to chair a Council that remains governed by international bargaining, or even to appoint a Commission whose initiatives are entirely submitted to approval by such a Council. Hence, even with this addition of an elected President – which may be a defensible idea in its own right – , the Council version of the strategy is far less promising than its Parliamentary version.¹⁵

¹⁴ As proposed, for example, by former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (see Franck 1995: 41).

¹⁵ Dehousse (1995: 19-25) contrasts the partisan, majoritarian logic of parliamentarism, which is meant to provide "democratic legitimacy" to the EU, and the representative, pluralist logic of federalism, which is meant to provide it with "state legitimacy". He argues against a shift from the latter to the former on the ground that it would jeopardize the EU's authority and stability. In his view, an adequate balance between the two logics would rather require the Commission to remain non-partisan and be accountable on all issues to the Council of Ministers turned into a real second Chamber. I have two main objections to this interesting analysis: (1) Authority, stability, legitimacy and the like do not form the ultimate objective – save perhaps for the rulers themselves – but only conditions for the pursuit of broader goals. All we need is "enough of them". This enough may be quite a bit less than is achievable but nonetheless better for the sake of what we ultimately need the EU for – which should be, as it is in the present contribution, the point of departure. (2) Which policies and institutions can be stable depends on how the interests are constructed, which in turn depends on how the institutions are structured. Highly centralized and powerfully redistributive national institutions can be

Demos-cracy versus demoi-cracy

Would the adoption of this strategy amount to making the EU more democratic? This is by no means obvious. For the crucial change that is being proposed in this policy area is not an increase or decrease in the level of democracy, but a shift from demoi-cracy to demos-cracy, a shift from accountability to the separate peoples of Europe (if redistribution were a purely national or intergovernmental matter) to accountability to the people of Europe as a whole.¹⁶ This shift is not justified because demos-cracy is always better

stable when interests are not primarily constructed along regional lines, which in turn is powerfully affected by the way in which political institutions have been shaped. Put crudely, my point is that we should start with the policies we want, next ask which UE institutions we need to get them and finally scrutinize the conditions under which these institutions can be made sufficiently viable, rather than start with an analysis of current stability or legitimacy conditions and try to make EU institutions, whatever they are, as stable or legitimate as possible.

¹⁶ On one definition of federalism, demoi-cracy would simply be democratic federalism, while demos-cracy would turn Europe into a non-federal, unitary state. (See for example King's (1982: 77, 143; 1993: 94) characterization of a federation by reference to the entrenched representation of the federated units in the legislative process of the federation.) But there is another conception of a federal system of government, that emphasizes the constitutional entrenchment of territorial decentralization, rather than of territorial representation. (See e.g. Follesdal's (1997) characterization of federalism in terms of a sharing of final authority over different competences, or indeed Belgium's official claim to being a federal state, despite the absence of any explicit representation of the federated units in decision-making at the central level.) In this second sense, even if the Council were scrapped, even if the whole Parliament were elected in a single constituency, and even if Europe's fundamental law took the form of a Constitution to be approved and altered by the European Parliament alone (rather than that of a set of Treaties), Europe could still be a strongly federal state. Indeed, it would be of the greatest importance that it should remain so.

than demoi-cracy, but because in the case of (much of) redistribution under contemporary economic conditions, raising the scale of the democratic game and changing its rules along the lines indicated can be expected to lead to far better decisions, as far as the overall goal of social justice is concerned, than those to which national governments would be driven by the interaction of economic and political mechanisms.

So, does the EU suffer from a democratic deficit, from a suboptimal level of democratic accountability? It is certainly not good in the long run that some officials in charge of decisions that deeply affect the citizens' lives should carry out their jobs unchecked by them or their representatives. But we have seen that there are ways in which increases in democratic accountability may make matters worse. The question whether there is a democratic deficit, whether we need more democracy, is therefore dangerously underspecified. For the key question concerns the type of democratic accountability we need: to start with, whether it is more demoi-cracy or more demos-cracy that is required.

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