

***When the Banal Becomes Political: the EU in the Age of Populism***

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The European Union is facing a new era of politicization. In particular, the EU's history of technocratic and elite-driven governance has made it a compelling target for anti-establishment populist movements across Europe. From the UK's Brexit vote, to the increasing electoral success of euroskeptic parties across France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, the EU seems to be in the crosshairs of populist leaders everywhere.

This new politicization should not be surprising to students of politics. Despite the highly intrusive and consequential movement of power and authority toward the European level that has occurred over the last several decades, the EU's highly insulated governance processes have been subject to remarkably little overt democratic electoral contestation. Even critically important developments such as the creation of the euro were not subject to partisan debate between mainstream parties on the left or right. Instead, a series of referenda around a few issues have been the only mechanism within which mass contestation has occurred.

I have argued in previous work that this apolitical frame for the EU's development was very successful in providing an initial foundation for the EU. Paradoxically, it was the lack of politicization that allowed the European project to successfully evolve into a historically innovative system of governance in a region previously ravaged by war and economic stagnation. While power politics and institutional factors played a key role, social processes mattered too, as the EU's evolution rested in part on the broader set of legitimating symbols and practices put into play by the EU, national leaders, and private actors alike. The everyday symbols and practices built up through things like free mobility across national border or euros coins in pockets and corner stores all worked to make seem natural what was in fact a dramatic departure from the historical grip of the nation-state. But we are in a different era, as the EU can no longer be simply tolerated as a banal bureaucracy regulating the size of bananas.

Thus, one of the key questions confronting Europe today is whether it can transform itself into a legitimate post-national political community in the face of politicization and the populist backlash. Can the EU and its leaders create the necessary political culture of overt, healthy democratic contestation to allow for open and constructive debate about the EU's powers, values and programs? Alongside the need to repair the policies and mechanisms of EU governance, I argue that the broader political culture, and its fragile imagined community of Europeans, needs to be rebuilt. The EU and those political leaders who support its innovative governance form need to be more direct about the value and cost of Europe, and more open to the emotional issues of identity it engages.

Only then will the EU project and its uniquely cosmopolitan identity be able to successfully navigate this age of Populism.

### ***The EU's Ongoing Crises***

The few years have been very rough for the European Union and its citizens. Most dramatically, the referendum vote taken on 23 June 2016 by the United Kingdom over membership in the EU represents a startling departure from the EU's seemingly inevitable path of "ever closer union." The waves of Middle Eastern refugees washing up on the beaches of Italy and Greece have produced a humanitarian crisis of heart-wrenching proportions. Meanwhile, tensions within the eurozone continue, with cutbacks and austerity programs resulting in a grinding recession in Greece and much of Southern Europe. Russian leader Vladimir Putin remains a divisive shadow over Europe. Finally, the EU has seen the rise of autocratic regimes within its own borders, as backsliding by Hungary and Poland seem to be eroding democratic consolidation in the former Soviet sphere, creating a fundamental challenge to the EU as a liberal, democratic order.

These crises have been met with seemingly ineffectual responses by the EU and national leaders, and frustration and anger across European publics. Unsurprisingly, therefore, euroskeptical parties have grown exponentially and fanned demands for the renationalization of sovereign control over both borders and markets. While the EU has stumbled badly at various points in its half century of existence, the seriousness and the multiplicity of challenges it is facing today are unprecedented and intersect importantly with the broader sweep of global populism.

How should we make sense of this moment, and the role that populism is playing in fanning the flames of the EU's crises? My argument in a recent book, *The Politics of Everyday Europe*, was that the EU has risen to become a powerful, innovative political entity in part because it has been depoliticized by design, framed by elites as banal and unremarkable. The symbols and practices surrounding EU governance continuously shape the everyday lives of Europeans and redraw the boundaries of legitimate authority in a series of social processes that undergird governance. But they have done so in subtle, under the radar ways that do not directly engage political passions, prompt partisan debates, or create a deep attachments to the EU as a political community.

Unlike the impassioned nationalism of the modern nation-state, the EU's cultural infrastructure is rooted in a specific type of 'banal' authority, which navigates national loyalties while portraying the EU as complementary to, not in competition with, local identities. The labels, images, and practices generated by EU policies are often deracinated, purged of their associations with the powers of the nation-state and instead standardized into a seemingly unobjectionable blandness. The euro's paper currency displays abstracted bridges and windows--instead of images tied to a specific person or place. Rather than building one monumental

national capital in Brussels to symbolize and practice EU governance, European institutions and their mostly unremarkable buildings are flung far across its member states, with the European Parliament even moving, vagabond-like, between cities. The creation of a single diplomatic voice for Europe was been labeled the “High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy,” not the European Foreign Minister, symbolically watering down the impact of this potentially pivotal job. Moreover, the symbols and practices of Europe are often ‘localized’ by nesting them in the member states: the standardized EU passport is issued by each country with its own national crest and the words “France” or Czech Republic” beneath the European Union label. Euro coins balance standardized European symbols and maps on one side while a celtic harp graces euros originating in Ireland, Queen Beatrix is on Netherland’s coins and Cervantes on Spain’s.

Yet the current storm facing Europe has pierced this bubble of depoliticization, and made clear the limits of these strategies. While my research demonstrates that this cultural infrastructure has underpinned the EU’s growing political authority, it also shows how the absence of real engagement with the public over the EU’s ever increasing powers has created a democratic vacuum, one that must be filled if the EU is to survive.

### ***The EU as an Emergent but Incomplete Polity***

To fully understand the challenges the EU faces in this age of populism, we should think of the EU through a historical lens, as a new emergent governance form beyond the nation-state. Rather than seeing it as just a set of temporary bargains or deals between states, we need to recognize that the EU has accrued a tremendous amount of political authority, as its policies and programs penetrate deeply into the daily life of European citizens. However, the EU’s authority has been tempered by its uneasy post-national nature and its precarious legitimacy with European publics. Unlike earlier historical political authorities that eviscerated previous power holders, the EU has moved certain key capacities and powers to the European level, while keeping other crucial partner policies and institutions at the national level. Political parties and electoral politics have remained focused on domestic politics within the member states of the EU, while technocracy and expert consensus trumps democratic representation at the European level. While this balancing of sovereignty has allowed the EU to achieve an astonishing level of integration over the past decades, it has also resulted in major dysfunctions. It is these dysfunctions that have produced an unprecedented level of contestation and backlash in today’s EU.

While there is no nation-state on this planet that has a perfect institutional governance structure, an incomplete political development plagues the EU in notable ways. Think of the creation of a single currency, the euro, occurring without the plethora of supporting fiscal, banking and political institutions present in every other national currency. The eurocrisis has demonstrated the dire need for such institutions. The Schengen area tore down internal border controls and allows for

free movement across its members, while EU citizens enjoy a common, standardized passport. But little was achieved towards the hard task of developing effective EU level control of external European borders. Nor was mobility across EU borders matched by upgraded intelligence sharing or funding for agencies such as Frontex or Europol, making more likely such horrors as the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015. While unsurprising given the tendency of the EU to avoid the hard fought and often violent battles that produced such capacities in nation-states, this institutional incompleteness has dramatically worsened the impacts of the euro and migrant crises.

### ***Democratic Contestation and the Glue of Identity***

All of these shortcomings are further compounded by the particular type of identity politics generated by the EU's incomplete development, and its linked democratic deficit. Western democracies across the globe today face backlashes to elite rule, expert delegation, and conventional party politics. But the EU now faces an even more challenging situation than the United States or European national democracies. Whereas the rise of the European nation-state in the nineteenth century saw a multitude of efforts by motivated elites to create an impassioned sense of shared national identity, the EU has been consistently framed by those in power as complementary to, not in competition with, national identities. The EU has advanced exactly because it has not directly confronted the true transformations in sovereignty and political authority that have occurred, resulting in a very anemic domestic political debates about EU issues for most of its existence—until the surge in populism and anti-establishment critiques in today's newly politicized EU. While the culture generated by everyday life under EU governance has made the shift in political authority to the EU level palatable over the past five decades, and underpinned an astonishing degree of governance building in the EU, it has for the most part not resulted in a strong sense of solidarity or an impassioned, single European identity, but rather, by design, a much less contested, banal 'imagined community' of Europe.

Why is the cultural infrastructure of deliberate depoliticization important? All polities experience policy failures and hard times, but some prove resilient, able to pull together to overcome their troubles without deep lasting cleavages and disintegration. Part of the reason for success lies in the political legitimacy of the governance system and the sense of shared social solidarity of the citizens within it. Simply put, political systems hang together better if they are made up of people who feel a sense of deep-knit, emotional attachment to the larger political community. Identifying as an imagined community, in Benedict Anderson's seminar phrase, glues together a citizenry and underpins political authority and the accrual of power at the center of a polity. And it certainly would make sorting through the eurozone crisis or dealing with the waves of desperate migrants washing up in the Mediterranean much easier to accomplish.

In contrast to historical cases of democratic development, the EU has evolved to govern rather than represent, even as the ever deeper penetration of the EU into people's lives means a greater need to debate the distributional consequences of EU policies, the values promoted, and the choices at stake. The more youthful and cosmopolitan citizens of the EU may embrace this new reality and see it as a natural and positive thing, a backdrop to their changed everyday lives that creates more opportunities than it closes down. But those that feel left behind and fearful about the future are not comforted by an expert consensus for the single market, open borders or the euro, but rather wish their voices to be heard. The sleight of hand of the EU's particular cultural strategies of symbols and practices that emphasize the EU as localized and deracinated has clearly bumped up against its limits, and fed the very populism that challenges its existence.

### ***Taking the Long View***

Historically, new political authorities have emerged and evolved in messy, ugly, and often violent ways. National projects of political unification have involved coercion, civil wars, and the brutal exercise of power. These projects are never complete: think of how questions of federalism in the United States are still being fought today. Although the nation-state seems universal and natural, there have been many other forms of government in Europe alone: the Hapsburg Empire, Italian city-states, and the Hanseatic League, for example, have all come and gone.

The EU therefore remains a historical innovation, even as the EU's strategy of building its governance by stealth and shielded from direct contestation, is under attack by the tide of populist politics that directly confronts the technocratic, elite driven nature of the EU. The recent and very real crises have brought the EU out into the open, and moved it from the under the radar, banal authority of its initial decades to become a rightful focus of heated debate.

But in some ways, the overt politicization around Europe that the migrant crisis, eurozone problems, and Brexit shock have prompted is a good thing, as it brings out the real issues at stake and opens them up for robust debate. In addition to breeding euroskepticism, it has also prompted some surprising displays of solidarity, such as the protestors marching in London after the Brexit vote, fervently waving signs that say "We love the EU," or the variety of video and Facebook messages made by ordinary EU citizens stating "We love our British friends." The rise of the Pulse of Europe civil society movement has brought regular demonstrations of fervent support for the EU in Germany and across the EU.

Likewise, the campaign and broader political strategies of French President Emmanuel Macron has also been an opportunity for an unusual piercing of the veil of banal depoliticization, providing a more positive response to the critiques of populist euroskeptics. Macron has staked his political future on the idea of an explicit discussion of the costs and benefits of Europe and an impassioned advocacy of the latter. His campaign rallies were remarkable in having supporters wave both

the red, white and blue of the French flag along with the EU's circle of gold stars, while playing the "Ode to Joy," the EU's anthem. His widely publicized speech on 26 September set out a new vision for a strong EU, one unapologetic in its support for a united Europe. Likewise, in a recent interview with *Der Spiegel*, Macron talks of the need for political "heroes" and explicit efforts to create impassioned grand narratives to bring Europe together. But it remains to be seen whether the public sphere across Europe will support such more positive politicization and honest discussions of the future of the EU.

The last few years of crisis have shown how far Europe has to go to forge a robust and viable sense of political identity for all its citizens, and to build the capacity for healthily partisan engagement with the issues facing the EU. Referenda, the most readily available tool for EU citizens, are a poor mechanism to substitute for true representation. The question remains: in this moment of crisis, can the EU transform itself into a fully legitimate political authority with a functional set of institutions and a true sense of post-national political community? Or is the EU destined, like the Hanseatic League or the Italian City States before it, to be swept into the dustbin of history?

The EU will only work if all its citizens can imagine themselves part of a cosmopolitan, thriving democratic polity, one that balances local, national, and EU powers, creates social and economic opportunity, and provides real channels for political representation, accountability, and contestation. The EU today must refashion its cultural infrastructure and political authority to meet these democratic demands and confront head on the populist revolt, while it also builds its institutions—including the eurozone, Schengen, and foreign policy-- to deal with the multiple crises it faces. If not, its bold experiment in a new post-national political form will end in failure.