

The Fight for Europe. State of Exception, reloaded

By Priya Basil

Words have been wielded aplenty to diagnose the EU's poor state of health and write various prescriptions for treatment. But words have had little effect: the EU is like a patient who won't accept the disease, let alone the medicine. What's more, the worse its condition gets, the less effective conventional remedies become, not least because they need a while to take effect – and time is no longer on the EU's side. Indeed, it may well have reached the stage where the medicine actually worsens the disease. This is clear in the allergic reaction of many citizens to the prospect of a representative EU parliament elected via equal suffrage and equipped with full legislative rights. All they see in such plans is “more Europe” – understood as more for Europe (that is others) not for me.

An assurance of “more for you” is being made by populists who pledge greater control, security, jobs, independence, affluence, power. The EU urgently needs to reclaim this ground by countering the fabulist promises of populists with some fabulous offers of its own.

How can this be done? In a word: DEMOS. Ordinary citizens – the lifeblood of democracy – need to infuse the EU's entire circulatory system. The demos is frequently invoked by demagogues, who claim to speak for and to common people, but their definition of “the people” is ever shifting and always exclusionary. The idea of the demos as a diverse and inclusive body needs restituting and the EU must rise to the task, for only by reviving a demos can the union rehabilitate itself. The ancient Greek term holds a short alphabet that spells out a plan of action.

Democracy

European Days

Message

Others – European Green Card Lottery

Social (and Military) Service

The DEMOS plan takes as a given the need for reform of core institutions in Brussels to make them more democratic, and re-orientation of EU policies to make them serve the interests of all citizens, rather than corporate and national interests. Consequently, the plan elaborates other ways to swiftly strengthen connections between the EU and every single citizen.

The European Days: a public holiday from 5th to 9th May, beginning in 2017, in all EU member states. At the start of spring, as nature renews itself, Europeans too get a chance to rejuvenate. During this period, public transport across the union is free, hotels have special reduced rates and various public institutions hold open days. Everywhere, there are Europe-themed street parties, debates, readings, games, exhibitions, concerts, plays, films – all manner of free inter-cultural activities through which people can explore and reflect on what it means to be European.

It's unaffordable! Really? Can't an organization that spends billions on bailing out banks open its coffers to invest in its own citizenry, especially when the cost of not doing so may be its own demise?

It's bribery! Of a sort, granted. But for decades, the union has incentivized business through all manner of subsidies and special provisions, why shouldn't it offer a sweetener to its people?

It's bad for the economy! For too long now, politics has been driven by what's "good for the economy" on the erroneous assumption that this will automatically, eventually, translate into good(s) for all. The European Days would signal an extraordinarily bold shift by the EU away from the neo-liberal paradigm towards privileging other kinds of "growth". Such a holiday hands all citizens a significant chunk of the most precious commodity – time. This extra, free time has the potential to trigger profound individual and social development.

An intervention like the European Days with its associated moving, mixing and meeting of people will begin to create – something the union has spectacularly failed to do so far – a real body politik, a conscious demos composed of countless poleis. This will diffuse the distorting nationalist impulse that's being so alarmingly ratcheted up everywhere, for gathering people in different constellations and places affirms Arendt's incisive premise that the polis – and from that we can extrapolate to the demos – is not "...the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of speaking and acting together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."

Two separate designations of Europe Day actually already exist: 5th May for the Council of Europe and 9th May for the EU. Both are considered a "symbol" of the union, alongside the flag, the anthem, the motto and the euro. Yet the sum of Europe Day currently amounts to open doors at a few Brussels institutions and a poster competition that a handful of school students take part in. What a wasted opportunity! By making the two existing days bookends of a five-day holiday, the EU would create a symbol no one can overlook and everyone has the chance to fill with meaning.

Still, you can't create holidays out of nothing! It's legally impossible! But governments routinely declare public holidays for mourning. Moreover, they are ever quicker to invoke a 'state of exception' – suspending the usual rule of law to protect the greater public good in the name of national security – as France did after the 2016 terror attacks in Paris and Nice. Almost a year on, that country remains in this state of emergency, just one example of the observation made decades ago by Walter Benjamin, and more recently elaborated by Giorgio Agamben, that in contemporary democracies the state of exception has in fact become the norm. "We must attain," Benjamin posits, "to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Facism." Europe is once again at a critical juncture as it

struggles against a form of neo-Fascism. A real state of exception - in a radical divergence from the limits and restrictions it usually entails – would create a span of time in which new possibilities can arise and alter the status quo.

If the European Days can be realized, the rest of the DEMOS plan too can be managed. It will include the establishment of the European Service, a EU-wide equivalent of national service. All citizens aged between 18 and 25 get well paid to spend one or two years residing in at least two different EU member states, doing various kinds of social work, and learning European languages. For the youngsters the service is compulsory, but citizens of all ages have the chance to apply at any point in their lives for one year's service. Given the renewed interest in establishing a European Army prompted by uncertainty about the future of NATO, there is a strong case for having a voluntary military component to the European Service. This will build on the spirit of the European Days, deepening attachment to the EU and cultivating a pan-European outlook that is critical for sustaining the union into the future.

Across the political spectrum, people feel alienated because there are few instances, besides elections or public demonstrations, where they can join, let alone truly influence, political discourse or process. Many try to satisfy this need in the virtual world, especially through social media, which has to some extent fulfilled the role of the polis that, in Arendt's words, is "to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness." But, without a counterpart in actual space, the affirmation of social media proves insufficient. This is clear from the enduring dissatisfaction of the majority who use its tools, relying on them as a primary source both of information and expression. The deficiency of the medium is also evident in the language it increasingly generates: rhetoric of frustration and exaggeration, hostility and abuse. Moreover, the potential for distorting reality and manipulating data, as exemplified in the use of fake news and its circulation by bots emulating human activity, belies the promise of the Internet to liberate and equalize. If democracy is to thrive again, the hegemony of the Internet as the alternative public space must be challenged through creation of actual spaces and occasions for encounters with others.

Alongside efforts to galvanize solidarity here, Europeans must move towards more generous inclusion of Others who come from beyond our continent. A more humane, collective response to forced migration is nowhere in sight, and yet, due to climate change, demographic pressures, international terrorism and economic inequality, we can expect that the numbers of those compelled to move are only going to keep rising, and more people will decide to risk everything in the hope of a better life. Besides doing better on upholding the right to political asylum, we must also make a gesture towards those in less stable or wealthy lands who wish to live, as we do, in freedom, security, prosperity and peace. This can be done through a European Green Card Lottery run along the lines of the American model. People from all over the world apply, and every year the EU gives resident visas to 100,000 natives from countries deemed to have low rates of immigration to our continent. The newcomers would be settled across Europe according to a pre-agreed quota system. This arrangement would be fair to others, while giving

members states the chance to do background checks and prepare a smooth settlement process.

The DEMOS plan should be accompanied by a bold PR campaign that first explains goals and later shows results. Here the middle letter of the DEMOS alphabet comes into play: Message. Using advertising to inform citizens is legitimate and necessary. All media must be used and the EU should also found its own newspaper that could appear as a weekly (translated) supplement in select European dailies, as the New York Times does. This way the EU could assert a more coherent message in a media maze where national agendas dominate and deliberate misinformation distorts.

DEMOS. A European Union of the people, a democracy that's not just representative, but participatory on many levels. Only an engaged demos can jolt new life and meaning into the EU.

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