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Geoffrey M. Vaughan

Assumption College, gvaughan@assumption.edu

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Jurgen Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy* trans. Ciaran Cronin

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Geoffrey M. Vaughan

By any measure Europe is on the precipice of crisis. For those who long for a post-national polity, the rise of UKIP, the Front National, the Swedish Democrats and their cognates in other countries is an affront to all the work of integration and the great European Project. On the other hand, that these parties have made such headway—more so since the advent of the migrant crisis—reveals a very real problem. Whether one approves of the aims of these parties, from the liberal Eurosceptic to the aggressively nationalistic (or worse), they reveal a deep dissatisfaction with the EU. Although the essays and interviews collected in this volume were written before many of the most alarming events, they represent the best account of the European ideal as well as its shortcomings.

Jurgen Habermas is one of the most prominent German academics, a political sage and founder of a whole school of political studies. He is also, as confirmed by this collection of essays, a wholehearted enthusiast for the European Project. The question that only time will answer is whether his hopes for further integration will be fulfilled. Will future generations look back and admire his prescience? The migrant crisis and two terrorist attacks in Paris within the past year—among many other events—suggest to this reader that his is the last gasp of a peculiar European utopianism, one that sees itself as the fulfillment of a preferred narrative of history that is increasingly hard to believe in, given the direction of larger events.

Although he admits the existence of a “democratic deficit” in the European Union, the direct object of Habermas’ ire is what he calls “technocracy.” American readers might first think of Silicon Valley, as our tech-oligarchs hover over our own concerns about the future of democracy. For Habermas, however, technocracy is based in the opposite coast, on Wall Street and in the major banking and financial houses of the world. Credit default swaps, not apps; arbitrage, not code; these are his concerns. And as he wrote these essays in the context of the financial crisis of the so called PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain), his is a useful reminder that there is a real economy that has little to do with the latest devices and a great deal to do with the lives of real human beings who feel the promise of democracy has passed them by.

Habermas’ concern, repeated in several of the essays, is that the banking industry is paying the piper and the supposedly democratic regimes of the European Union are dancing as they are told to do. This is not an especially novel or intriguing analysis. Complaints about bankers running the world go back to the Medici, perhaps as far back as Crassus. They have taken on especially unsavory features at various points, having developed parallel Communist and Fascist versions in the early 20th century. Thankfully, Habermas pins his hopes on neither a national socialism nor an international version. Well, this last might need to be explained.

Euro-sceptics might mistake his support for a stronger European Union as a half-way measure towards international socialism, a kind of *continental* socialism, if you will. While he is certainly a supporter of various economic policies that are socialist in nature, he is motivated not by economic determinism nor by any form of dialectical materialism. What he wants is more democracy, albeit democracy as he understands it. Specifically, Habermas wants to see the European Union become a continent-wide institution capable of ensuring the process of “will formation.” By this he means a highly moralized (or normative, as he would prefer) and idealized form of consensus-building. Thus he clearly remains in the high Enlightenment tradition of Kant and Hegel. Consistent with that tradition he considers the nation-state an intermediary step in history’s unfolding of its cosmopolitan intent.

A characteristic feature of Habermas’ analysis is that national democracy is a nostalgic fiction. While once the nation state might have had control over its destiny, democracies organized at the national level have lost this control to the transnational banking industry. Witness Greece. His solution is the transnationalization of democracy, namely, the European Union, which he describes as a “supranational” democracy. The problem, which he is willing to admit several times in the book, is that there has never been as much support for this project among the *demos* as among their vanguard in Brussels and the various capitols of Europe. In his own words, “European unification has been a project pursued by the elites above the heads of the population.” In a telling comment in the interview conducted by Hubert Christian Ehalt and reproduced in this volume, he complains of the “short-sighted incrementalism of small steps personified by Angela Merkel” and apologetically decries a “lack of ‘political leadership’ in Europe.” Yet the half-measures and lack of leadership he so disdains are directly the result of what he identifies as “fear of their voters.”

The most revealing points in the book are those in which he addresses the reluctance of politicians to push political integration on their populations. For instance, he writes, “No party can afford to be the first to show its hand with pro-European slogans, because it has to fear a populist backlash orchestrated by its short-sighted competitors who in fact share similar goals.” Why might it be so easy to whip up the people into a frenzy in opposition to further integration? Why are pro-European slogans so unconvincing? Perhaps this is something the peoples (note the plural) of Europe do not want.

For someone who so desires a supranational political system, he has a great contempt for politics. More precisely, he has disdain for politics as anyone outside of a seminar room might recognize it. The reader can find this in his dismissal of the electorate as uninformed and easily led, on the one hand, and the politicians as cowardly manipulators “skilled in gimmicky ways of generating democratic legitimation.” And yet he remains a partisan of democracy, which he defines in an unexceptional if Kantian way, such that, “the addressees of coercive laws are subject only to the laws that they have enacted for themselves through a democratic process.” James Madison might agree with this as an abstract principle, but how might it deal with factions? Would Habermas content himself with controlling their effects or would he rather eliminate their causes? The notion of “will-formation” obscures a practical problem that Madison addressed with utmost clarity.

Habermas places a great deal of hope in the European Union, not just as a citizen of Europe himself, but as a student of philosophy. The term associated with the goal, as already cited, is “supranational”, but this does not quite capture the scale of the ambition nor the power of imagination it requires. Here is one explanation: “The constituting authority should be composed of the entire citizenry of Europe, on the one hand, and the peoples of Europe, on the other.” The idea is that nations would persist as locations of linguistic and cultural cohesion and as mechanisms for administration and enforcement of laws. Brussels would not be micromanaging affairs in Salerno, for instance. Each nation would have its proper role in the political life of the EU, but there would be a pan-European citizenry from Amsterdam to Zagreb. This citizenry would, when properly self-aware, keep in check any parochialism that might tempt a particular nation or two.

The most convincing way to understand what he is proposing is to consider the two great federal democracies of North America. Both Canada and the United States grew out of the political union of separate political units. The United States replaced the weak Articles of Confederation with the much more integrated and integrating Constitution in 1787, while Canada achieved Confederation in 1867. Both admitted new units into their federations over time and both now have national political cultures, political cultures that express themselves in parties that stretch from coast to coast and are not tied to particular regions. The states and provinces still exist as real centers of politics, and in the case of Quebec a minority language is dominant. So, although he insists that he does not seek a United States of Europe, perhaps he would relent to a Canadian version?

The difficulty in Habermas’ conception is highlighted by the very idea of a “Canada of Europe.” First of all, the official bilingualism of the country is not a practical bilingualism. Most of Anglo-Canada does not speak French and immigrants to the country prefer to learn English. In Quebec, the status of French is maintained by law, Bill 101, a law that is expressly in contravention of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, permissible only because of the “notwithstanding clause” (or *la clause dérogatoire*). Do we need to recall the separatist movement? Even Canada hardly seems like a promising model.

The problem is that Habermas consistently underestimates and underappreciates the difficulties created by the differences in language and culture. For instance, he writes, “Indeed, translingual citizenship uniting such a numerous variety of different language communities *is* a novelty. But Europeans already share the principles and values of largely overlapping political cultures. What is required is a European-wide political communication.” What would this form of communication look like? He seems unwilling to contemplate that the “novelty” of what he wants to create arises not from the fact that no one has ever thought of it before but because it is so difficult to produce. When he does, he merely shrugs it off. For instance, he admits that Southern Italy “exhibits premodern social and cultural traits alien to the state,” but dismisses the example as “not especially informative.” Such indifference is hard to take from someone who confidently proclaims that, “To renounce European unification would also be to turn one’s back on world history.” If from his own account, Italian unification is a defiance of history, how can we have such hope for Europe?

What would a pan-European political culture of 28 different nations with almost as many different languages look like? What could people from Finland to Malta, Portugal to Cyprus have in common? Have they ever had anything in common? Yes, they have. Although one would not know it by reading this book, Europe was once Christian. That heritage might be the only thing that ever provided a unifying theme, although the continent never seemed to catch the tune. This makes all the more odd the third section of this book, entitled “German Jews, Germans and Jews.” His explanation for the section appears in the first paragraph of the Preface, and is itself odd. Habermas included these essays because the relationship between Germans and Jews is especially difficult in light of their history and is especially relevant for “the political self-understanding of citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany.” Both of these are undoubtedly true, but their place in a book promoting the further integration of Europe is puzzlingly parochial. Why might a Europhile Basque or a Eurosceptic Englishman find these interesting?

The final essay of the volume, the essay on Heinrich Heine, is meant to pull together the three parts of the book, the first two that deal directly with the European political project and the last on Germans and Jews. There is something a little uncomfortable about this because Heine, as Habermas details at length, was a Jew who became a Protestant. Certainly he is not suggesting that the solution to “the Jewish question” is conversion to Christianity. Habermas is no fool, yet neither is he religious, and his essay reveals a profound inability to understand or appreciate any religious impulse. And so, with no apparent irony, this collection on the pressing need for further European integration ends with this passage from Heine, “All the peoples of Europe and of the whole world will have to survive this death struggle if life is to spring from death, and if Christian fraternity is to spring from pagan nationality.”

Habermas is right that there is much to learn from Heine. There is also much to learn from Habermas in this book, most especially how elite opinion understands what is most at stake in the European Project.

Geoffrey M. Vaughan is Associate Professor of Political Science at Assumption College, Worcester, MA. He is author of *Behemoth Teaches Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Political Education* and is completing a book on philosopher kings.
Geoffrey M. Vaughan, Political Science, 301 Founders Hall, Assumption College, 500 Salisbury St., Worcester MA, 01609 gvaughan@assumption.edu