



Europe's Left-Right Trajectories

by Jonathan White

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Two decades after the end of the Cold War, the political traditions of Left and Right were widely deemed to have fossilized. Many saw them as unable to express vital, contending alternatives, and only distantly related to contemporary political life. This paper examines how far this remains true in the light of Europe's current upheavals. It identifies ongoing evolution in their ideational structure, as figures of both Right and Left seek to articulate a critical perspective on the origins of the economic crisis. A mainly moralistic account emerges on the Right, a mainly systemic one on the Left. Both must contend with the persistence, possibly the ascendance, of a technocratic perspective which holds that principled critique is in any case largely futile. The paper considers the implications these changing ideological constellations hold for politics on the European scale, including for the European Union.

This paper considers what the current Crisis – of the European economy, of the eurozone, of the European Union – implies for the political opposition between Left and Right. In what ways does the distinction remain meaningful in today's Europe, if at all, and what kind of evolutions does it display? The paper begins addressing these questions by examining the familiar distinctions made between Left and Right, and the debates concerning whether these can be reduced to an enduring core. It goes on to analyze some of the salient perspectives on the current Crisis, and suggests that a promising basis on which to distinguish Left-Right ideologies in today's Europe is according to their account of its origins and the nature of the injustices it produces. One perspective tends to advance a systemic critique addressed to the failings of the market as a whole, the other a moral critique addressed to the failings of individual actors. At present, it is a division focused on diagnosis rather than prescription: these Left-Right formations remain half-formed, possibly transitional, in character. While by no means all political perspectives in contemporary Europe can be assimilated to these – there is a neoliberal position that eschews talk of injustices altogether, and there are culturalist positions whose main focus is on non-economic issues (e.g. the perceived threat of Islam) – they are traditions with the potential to grow. Whether either can become an electoral force is unclear – certainly they face

sizeable barriers. After asking whether Left and Right signify distinct and meaningful clusters of ideas in today's Europe, the paper concludes by examining what these changing constellations imply for politics on the European scale, including, though not only, for the European Union.

Ultimately, the analysis notes that when we examine some of the political interventions to have attracted significant public attention in recent months, we see signs of the Crisis producing moves to redefine what it is to be of the Right, and to evoke a Leftist response. These moves, while recognizable as extensions of previous Left-Right oppositions, are at the same time a reaction against the recently dominant conceptions of what it is to be Right or Left. They are shifts, not merely a crystallization of previous tendencies. Both are critical perspectives, one centered on moralistic and one centered on systemic critique. Moreover, though pursued differently by those in different national contexts, these moves seem at least partially informed by awareness of equivalent such responses in other settings in Europe. They entail modest tendencies at the ideological level, though possibly short-lived, towards the Europeanization of Left and Right. Whether they can couple critique with distinctive proposals for action is one of the key unanswered questions. These critical tendencies are informed by the (surely correct) perception that public opinion is increasingly hostile to policies introduced by diktat as necessary responses to system imperatives. They are attempts to articulate and shape genuine dissatisfactions. Yet their public resonance is likely to be as strong only as their ability to be politically visible and to generate tangible prescriptions.

Insofar as they gather this public support, all these critical perspectives potentially pose challenges for the EU in its current form. This disruptive potential is likely to be frustrated somewhat by the lingering neoliberalism of Europe's governing elites (most clearly visible in today's Centre-Right ruling parties, but also present in many Centre-Left oppositions), and by efforts to constitutionalise the type of technocratic structures which leave little scope for Left-Right debates to influence decision-making. But this is not likely to be a viable long-term strategy, nor is it clear one should wish it to be. Whatever else they may be, the critical perspectives we have discussed are democratic perspectives, even if (indeed especially if) they have populist elements. Attempting to protect the liberal order by insulating it from such currents seems a dubious way forward. The bold alternative would be to make EU and national decision-making more responsive to their pressures, thus encouraging them to consolidate as party-political orientations, and then seek by the conventional methods of political advocacy to ensure that it is the less chauvinistic varieties that succeed.

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Dr. Jonathan White, LSE

Jonathan White is Lecturer in European Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research interests lie in the fields of political sociology and political theory, with a particular focus on contemporary European democracy and the European Union. Prior to joining the LSE he was an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Humboldt University in Berlin, and a doctoral researcher at the European University Institute. His publications include articles in *American Political Science Review*, *The Journal of Politics*, the *British Journal of Political Science* and the *Journal of Common Market Studies*. His book *Political Allegiance after European Integration* appeared in April 2011 with Palgrave Macmillan.

