Book review

Mauro, E.; Levi, L.; Fabbrini, S. & Pasquino, G.
La Formazione del Sistema Partitico Europeo – The Formation of the European Party System
Latina, Atlantide Editore, 2023, 120 p.
ISBN: 978-88-99580-88-9

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The year 2021 marked the 80th anniversary of Altiero Spinelli's famous *Ventotene Manifesto*. Written while incarcerated during 1941, at the height of World War II, Spinelli's manifesto provided what would be the very foundations for a united Europe. To celebrate his influence, authors Ezio Mauro, Lucio Levi, Sergio Fabbrini, and Gianfranco Pasquino wrote *The Formation of the European Party System* as a culmination of their contributions during a seminar held in Ventotene in 2021.[1] Considering the European Union (henceforth, EU) elites' aspirations for an "ever closer Union", this volume provides a general, but important argumentation on the difficulties of the EU in establishing democratic and institutional tools that bring the European citizens closer to a true political union. In this regard, this volume brings a combination of federalist and functionalist approaches on which mechanisms could the EU tackle their institutional deficiency during the multiple crises Europe faced throughout the decades, starting from the crisis of the nation-state all the way to the absence of a true European party system.

In the first chapter, *The Ventotene Manifesto. We still need a Europe by conviction*, Ezio Mauro claims that the biggest weakness of Europe is the lack of political and institutional tools to exercise domestic and international authority. Guided by the Ventotene Manifesto's principles, Mauro suggests that the "idea of Europe" can only be practiced by rejecting nationalism and embracing a more federal model of Europe, with a set of institutions to

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[1] https://www.istitutospinelli.it/en/ventotene-national-seminar-2021/

establish a new world order and contest any source of oppression from fascist ideals. He ends his chapter by capturing the weakness of the West during the Afghan crisis and that today there is a bigger need to build a united Europe to face such challenges.

The second chapter, *The Ventotene Manifesto: the topicality of the prophecy on the dividing line between progressive and reactionary parties*, Lucio Levi gives us a brief backstory of Altiero Spinelli and the writing of the *Ventotene Manifesto*. Then, he provided three crisis that laid the foundations for the European Union: the nation-state, democracy, and political parties.

The first factor explains that the rapid industrialisation, the extension of economic cooperation beyond national borders, and the formation of larger markets eroded the sovereignty of the nation-states in Europe, especially the hardship of European countries to compete with the USA and the USSR, whom they developed into economic superpowers. Nowadays, there is a certain level of unresponsiveness in terms of efficient executive powers that bind decisions at the international level in the EU, as Levi suggests. The second factor traces back to the so-called "democratic deficit", which the author considers the existence of unanimity voting and veto powers by the EU's Member states in crucial matters (such as taxation, security, foreign policy, migration, and revision of the treaties) to be highly undemocratic since even illiberal democracies such as Hungary which are able to block the decisions. Levi calls this as a "dictatorship of the minority" (p. 78). As such, the author suggests the use of qualified majority vote on these crucial topics. A very important claim that is brought by Levi is that EU's democracy is incomplete and the assertations that democracy can simply be measured by electoral results are not enough, especially since, as the author suggests, the EU has no government and has no authority to enforce the law and punish corruption and terrorism. The third factor, the crisis of political parties, the author considers that political parties have lost their field of action and influence in politics due to the decision-making lobbying growth of financial multinational groups, religious organisations, global civil society members, and even criminal and terrorist organisations. Fundamentally, Levi advises that political parties should participate in politics beyond national borders since their functioning is highly dependent on state institutions, given that parties are bounded by these institutions to carry their task. As such, political parties, as Levi suggest, should take a more globalised role to respond to global challenges in Europe.

While the talks about a "European federation" might seem controversial, given the number of people who oppose a federal Europe, what Levi considers is that the topicality of the European federation lies not in the elimination of sovereignty and the nation-state, but in the reorganisation of power among several levels of government to allow nation-states to find a bigger role in the globalised world, with political parties as actors on managing and improving the state that they are in. After making a reference to Lipset and Rokkan's "cleavage theory" (1967), although the author does not directly mention this terminology, where political parties compete with each other on the rift between capitalists *vs.* socialists, urban *vs.* agrarian, and state *vs.* church, Levi suggests that the federalist project seeks to relieve the overwhelming foreign policy and security responsibilities of the nation-states, as well as warning the reader of the presence of nationalism, since this concept, in his words, "represents the return to the past with the disasters that accompanied it" (p. 84).

What follows suite is the potential for "Europeanisation of political parties", in which Levi provides a quote by Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa (2006) on what is the definition of the point of no return in European unification. A section of Tommaso's speech is quite interesting:

"In a civilised society, blood and iron are replaced by electoral struggle, and armies by political parties". This unique analogy considers that the process of European unification, suggested by Levi, can be achieved by a shift of competition between parties on the European level and in the formation of a European party system, and the only true answer to the shortcoming of the European democracy is the Europeanisation of political parties. In addition, Levi makes reference to the EU's institutional system, where the European Commission (henceforth, EC) is the executive branch, and the bicameral-type legislative statues belong to both the European Parliament (henceforth, EP) and the Council of Ministers. He suggests that, since the EP has the task of giving a vote of no confidence to the EC, this is the only chamber to be able to express a parliamentary majority that can safeguard the majority of citizens.

Levi considers that, in modern democracies, political parties play a pivotal role in connecting civil society and state institutions, by collecting the civil society's interests and transmitting them to government, transforming into political decisions. Afterwards, there is a section that mentions the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, that was employed during the 2014 and 2019 European parliamentary elections, though the latter election date this system failed. This system would allow lead candidates for the presidency of the EC to be appointed by the European political parties and the party whose candidate received most votes would be nominated president of the EC.[2] Levi claimed that the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism failed in 2019, when the supposedly winner, Manfred Weber, was instead replaced by Ursula von der Leyen, a candidate nominated and supported by the European Council. Perhaps a future edition might add more background information about this point to assist readers in understanding why the *Spitzenkandidaten* failed beyond the clash between Parliament and European Council, such as the lack of majority support for Weber. Nevertheless, Levi suggests that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system should be employed in the next European elections albeit more transparently in a way that voters can become more aware of the lead candidates and their vote will count not only the choice of a European party, but also for the leader of the EC.

Levi's chapter concludes that the creation of federal parties is driven by the need to bring different sets of political parties in the EU to form the EP in large majorities and lead the Union. He concludes that a vote has a democratic meaning if voters perceive that their vote will allow things to change. For such matter to happen, European elections must have a federal approach in which the voters may choose the formation of a European government. Only then, by the author's words, the formation of an authentic European party system can be forged.

The third chapter, *Sovereignism and European integration*, written by Sergio Fabbrini, tackles the clash between Europeanism and nationalism. As told by the author, the climax of this battle was achieved during the United Kingdom's exit from the EU in 2020 (Brexit). Fabbrini considers that Brexit "represented a triumph of the independentist nationalism over the European interdependence and its institutionalised form" (p. 95). While the exit was successful, the aftermath was not, as even nationalists re-defined their own idea of "nationalism" with "sovereignty" to be on par with the European integration process. As such, Fabbrini suggests that the nationalist rhetoric suffered ideological changes to better avoid the example that Brexit provided. The author provides an example of the Conte's first term in Italy, where the prime-minister, Giuseppe Conte, carried a more independentist nationalism position

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[2] A candidate for the position of European Commission president, as stipulated in article 17 of the Treaty of the European Union, is first appointed by the European Council through qualified majority. After its approval in the Council, the candidate must appear before a committee in the European Parliament in order to receive the voting approval of the Parliament.

around the EU. However, Conte's second term saw a major change in which he adopted a more pro-EU position, due to the constraints of EU interdependence. As such, even if nationalist sentiments still exist in the form of radical parties, such as the radical right-wing, Fabbrini considers that nationalism has to re-invent itself to better recognise that the interdependence of the EU provides economic and security opportunities, giving examples such as the COVID-19 crisis and, more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022.

The concept of sovereignism, in the words of the author, "is not based on a theory or even less a vision", but on the basis of a return to the Europe of nations, while criticising the EU instead on providing an alternative union. Supports of sovereignism reject the common market and have strengthened the intergovernmental governance of the EU at the expense of the supranational one. Fabbrini separates two kinds of sovereignists in the EU: the West sovereignists, and the East sovereignists. Both sides of sovereignists defended their own visions, such as the West supporting the redistribution of refugees and eliminating the economic sanctions towards Russia during the 2014 Crimea annexation, while the East sovereignists rejected the entry of new refugees and supported sanctions to Russia both during the Crimean crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, one thing that both sides tend to agree on, as suggested by the author, is the denial of any supranational measure or institutional mechanism, denouncing the "impoverishment of national democracies" (p. 101). Fabbrini concludes his chapter that nationalism has been readjusted to sovereignist positions in an attempt to accept (by necessity) the essential reality of interdependence in the EU. He concludes that if sovereignism is an attempt to turn nationalism endogenous to the EU, then its outcome has not been, so far, successful.

The fourth and final chapter, *Institutions and parties of the European Union. In search of the democratic deficit*, Gianfranco Pasquino provides a clarification of the broad and loose tendency conceptualisation of the "democratic deficit" in the EU. By adopting the institutional approach, Pasquino defines "democratic deficit" as the lack of democracy inside an institution, a party and party system, and an entire political system. By "democracy", the author uses the terminology "power of the people" and by "power" he bases his explanation on David Easton's (1965) definition of power as "the authoritative allocation of values in society".

Throughout the chapter, Pasquino seems to develop a less federal position compared to his peers in the previous chapters. He considers that the EP does possess some problems on its representative role: European elections regarded as less important and, consequently, of second order, with low turnout; and the EP lacking legislative initiative with limited powers. However, the author suggests that there is not a structural democratic deficit in the EP, but more of short-term inconveniences of function and functionality.

Additionally, Pasquino argues that the Council should not be accused of not being a democratic body, since each of the heads of government that represent the European Council were elected domestically by political majority. Regarding the EC, the author claims that the institution is often attacked by the "democraticists" since the institution as a whole —alongside its president and each individual commissioner— are not directly elected by the people. The author indicates that the president of the Commission is nominated by the members of the European Council, which, similar to the argument Pasquino provided before, are voted by the citizens of the Member states, and that the approval of the individual commissioners and the president is activated from the whole circuit of the European institutions, giving it a certain level of democracy that "should make pale a few Member states" (p. 109).

Regarding the role of political parties, Pasquino argues that it is not the absence of real European parties that constitute the democratic deficit, but in the faulty functioning of the parties that constitute a real deficit. He provides a hypothesis on how it would be possible for national parties to aggregate too many collective preferences in the supranational level. Here, he provides a question on how to deal with the rather unexcepted consequences on the Europeanisation of political parties. As claimed by the author, he did not enter the debate about the (transnational) European parties, although he wishes for them to find transnational ways to campaign for elections and attenuate the notion of European elections as second order. He concludes this chapter by stating that he wishes to disprove the notion of an irreparable democratic deficit and frame the debate on democracy and functionality "in a harbinger way" for future developments in the EU's political project (p. 117).

The authors seem to share one common goal: to contribute with new ideas on how to develop the EU's political system. However, even with a culmination of federal and functional approaches, there were some topics that could have been better interpreted and analysed such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the European (transnational) parties, the latter subject seemed to be missing some of its focus.

But overall, this book provides a short but extensive view of Europe's crisis and how they were dealt with, the potential for development of the EU's democratic institutions, and political parties as one of the main actors to sustain the foundations of Europe's democratic values. With a simplistic language, this volume offers both federal and functional perspectives of the EU political system. It is a must read for scholars in European studies and political science in general.

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