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Europe in German

Review of “A német Európa” by
 Ulrich Beck’s

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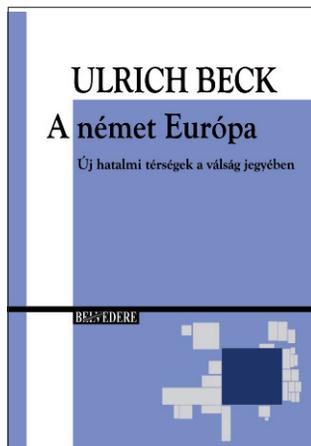
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What to anticipate when a German sociologist, a resolute Europe-supporter publishes a book entitled “The German Europe”? Support for Europe from a German point of view, or support for Europe from a European citizen who happens to be German? The latter one and there is no contradiction. It is possible to debate the leftist perspective and conclusions, but it would be irrational to ignore the opinion of Ulrich Beck, the author of *Cosmopolitan Europe* and *World Risk Society* (published in Hungary by the Belvedere Publisher in 2007 and 2008). The title

alone is provocative and Beck knows it. As Europe experienced earlier how Germany opposed fiercely its neighbours in the Bismarckian era and had a major part in the outbreak of WWI under the leadership of emperor William II (not to mention *Das Dritte Reich* of Hitler), citizens and politicians of the continent might be overrun by worries and visceral fear when they learn that some kind of ‘German Europe’ is emerging. However, according to Beck it has already emerged: “Everybody knows, yet we break a taboo by declaring that Europe has become German.” Nobody planned, but the economically strong Germany has become a great power amongst the decision-makers of European policy under the shadow of Euro collapse (p. 13.) After the decades spent with public confessing of historical guilt, the Germans themselves could not handle this situation at first, but this has changed as well. “Suddenly, everybody in Europe speaks German. Not the language, but the approval of those solutions for which Angela Merkel has fought a long, but successful fight.” – said Volker Kauder, the fraction leader of the CDU in the Bundestag on an event organised by the party in 2011. Even the number of participants at German courses has remarkably increased in European cities; many of them would like to work in “German-speaking countries” or for a German company. While most European countries still suffer the consequences of the economic crisis, with an unemployment rate hardly manageable in some places, the economic indexes of Germany and other “German-speaking countries” (Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg or Holland) are excellent, the unemployment rate is not only low, but there is also a lack of labour force in some



regions, so there the applicants from European crisis zones are really welcomed.¹

But what reasons have led to “German Europe” and what are the consequences for Germany, and especially for Europe? These are the questions that the author intends to answer. In Europe and mainly in East-Central Europe, it is often forgotten that the European Union despite its deficiencies and problems is indeed a success story. It was not rare that the European countries earlier tried to overcome their internal problems and interstate conflicts with weapons, or with the introduction of duties and embargos. Between the countries that were integrated there is no war any more, and the means of managing economic conflicts have been remarkably improved, even if it is not evident at first glance in all cases. As the author puts it: the great development represented by the European Union – in opposition to the continental history of colonial empires and nation states – can be grasped at the fact that Europe and democracy are synonyms (p. 41.). Moreover, the European Union, despite being considered infirm by many, has achieved a leading position in world economy: with its 18,6% share of the global GDP, the EU precedes the avowedly emerging giant, China (14,9) and the United States (17,1) as well. It is true, though, that the GDP per capita still has to improve, since the average of the EU28 falls behind the values of the Anglo-Saxon countries and Japan.² Nevertheless, there are a lot of problems in the EU, unlike in Germany. The engine of Europe is German economy: it gives more than one fifth of the 28 member states’ GDP, and it is only preceded by the

more populous USA, China and Japan in the world ranking. However, as Beck points out, these indexes are no satisfying references for the usual European citizen: the German saving policy divides Europe; it does not matter that the member states’ governments support it either out of conviction or under pressure, if the majority of citizens reject it. One major source of tension are the enduringly high rates of unemployment which are still increasing in some regions despite the austerity measures, and afflict primarily the young entrants leaving them with an image of a hopeless future. In certain Southern countries, the unemployment rate of the youth even exceeds 50%. Moreover, the conflict between public opinions of the crisis-stricken and creditor countries is sharpening, as the former one refuses the deadly pills of crisis-healing, while the latter cannot understand why they should financially support the indebted ‘lazy’ countries. In Beck’s opinion, this obviously shows that there would be various Europes in Europe in the future. As he writes: at least three dimensions of new inequalities in Europe exist; firstly, the inequality between the Euro- and non-Euro countries; secondly, the division within the Euro-zone (creditors and debtors), and thirdly, the inequality of the two speeds in one Europe (pp. 21. and 53.). The author believes that all these processes contribute to the strengthening of Germany’s leading role in the European Union.

The economy prospers, the unemployment is not really high and keeps decreasing; the Germans as the teachers of the EU set an example to the member countries. Beck however, as a sociologist, is not surprised by the fact that people in Greece and Spain fume at the system where they think the weakest have to pay the costs of the crisis and where they see disparity and injustice. The banks that had formerly declared the omnipotence of free market and condemned every form of state regulations had asked now the greatest state help possible and they got it. According

¹ Péter Tectet: Európa németül fog beszélni (Europe is going to speak German). *Válasz.hu*, 2011. november 20., <http://valasz.hu/vilag/a-targyalasok-soran-mindig-europai-szellemen-beszeltunk-43306> (Access: 2014. december 14.)

² Cited by: *Portfólió.hu*, 05-05-2014. http://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/na_melyik_a_vilag_legnagyobb_gazdasaga.198535.html (Access: 2014. november 30.)

to Beck, the financial system is off the hinges. But he proves with clear argumentation that interdependency in the common Europe is factual, Greece's secession or exclusion from the Eurozone would cause more damage than "saving". This concrete example, the assistance to Greece reveals the dilemma of the EU leaders as well. The actual government of Greece has to pretend for its voters that it is opposed to the forceful intervention in their politics, but the chancellor of Germany cannot boast at home either with the unsecure fruits of the financial support for Greece. The author concludes, not without bitterness: European internal policy nowadays is not oriented towards the European commonwealth, but it is influenced by national elections, the media and economic interests. All this serves the survival at home. And everybody thinks that they would be more successful, if they displayed doubt, and they did not stand up for the common future of the EU, but they prized national interests. Most politicians do not even consider taking risks in internal affairs for the sake of Europe (p. 31.) Anyway, we learn that every cloud has a silver lining: Beck says that the crisis not only chopped Europe figuratively into pieces, but paradoxically, it brought its citizens closer to each other, as some discussed in the last months the Greek economy more intensively than the issues of the labour market in their own regions. Never has Europe be spoken about with such intensity by the front pages of newspapers, the economic and cultural columns, by the local news, in the village and at the dinner table (p. 50.) which would hopefully result in the emergence of a common European consciousness. European problems are European problems in Portugal, Germany, Greece and Hungary: if one domino falls, no one knows how many more it would knock off and where the process would lead. Furthermore, the phenomenon called globalisation happens parallel to the European integration, in other words, Chernobyl, Fukushima, 9/11 or

the crash of the American credit markets have indeed influenced the European region and the European decisions.

According to Beck, the primary leader of the EU is neither the Committee, nor the President of the Council; it is in fact the crownless queen of (German) Europe: Angela Merkel. The German Beck believes that the source of the German chancellor's power is her "tendency" for not acting, or temporizing. Whenever she has to take a definite position in important question, she does it; but if the actual power relations require, she is ready to take a 180 degree turn at anytime without feeling guilty, as a true Machiavellist. Considering other components (German culture of stability, connection to the orthodoxy of nation state, etc.) attributed to the Merckelian policy, Beck creates the term of Merkievellism (combining the essential elements of *The Prince* by the Florentine political thinker, Machiavelli and the everyday political practice of chancellor Merkel). Beck might be a bit too strict with the German leader, and at the same time, he might overestimate the significance of her personal policy, or her possibilities in the European governance. Being uninterruptedly in power for such a long time (since 2005) is indeed an important political advantage, but the German diligence, thrift and economic achievements give the real background for Merkel's nation state policy. The real merits of the "Mutti" are that she has become the reader of German souls, her Protestant Puritanism, work moral and diligence has met the similar attitude of the Germans. And it is indeed her accomplishment that unemployment has been significantly reduced and her Christian democrat government was able to boost German economy.

Beck is right when he states that Merkel temporizes on the European level, the real question is whether she does it out of wise consideration as Beck supposes and as it seems afterwards.

Temporising or decision making, Merkel

demands austerity, tax moral and discipline in state finances as the requirements of Germans, surrounded by 'careless peoples' adds Beck mockingly. Although Beck criticises the German government, especially because of its European policy, he declares: compared to its historical antecedents, the present Germany is the best that we have ever seen (p. 72.).

As far as the future is concerned, the author hesitates, but he is optimistic in connection with the outcomes. The (latent) world risk society is a revolutionary one where normal and extraordinary situations cannot be separated. The danger that casts doubt on the existence of the Euro and the EU is implicitly an extraordinary situation which is not restricted to the nation states. This an extraordinary situation of transnational characteristic that is used by different participants (politicians of nation states, the non-voter representatives of the European institutions [e. g. the European Central Bank], social movements and managers of powerful financial concerns) in various ways (with technocratic or democratic legitimacy).

Beck asks: can the citizens of Europe be convinced to find a solution for the common crisis in cooperation? The author suggests that Europe can develop in two directions. In the fortunate case, the history overloaded with wars of nation states would be defeated and the crisis would be curbed through democratic cooperation. In the second case, the technocratic reactions for the crisis would bring the dusk of democracy, as the threatening catastrophe would legitimize every allegedly necessary measure; annul every kind of opposition and in this sense lead to an absolutistic rule (p. 41.). All in all, the 'German Europe' that has come to life Beck finds inappropriate. The alleged necessity of German austerity policy has pushed the principle of equal participation in the

background and it is more and more frequently substituted by forms of hierarchic dependency (p. 73.). Ulrich Beck concludes at the end of his essay volume that a social contract inspired by Rousseauian philosophy would be essential at the beginning of the 21st century which would exceed the nation state situation and offer more freedom, more democracy and greater social security for the citizens through its elevated Europeanism. And how can it be realised? Beck indicates: through the coalition of the indebted countries and Germany that gains profit from the crisis. The Merkiavellistic governance has to be modified; (full?) political-economic union should take the place of neoliberal reforms. Or it might be achieved by the protesting masses of citizens who would fight from beneath for a union that is political and committed for social democratic principles, since only such a union would be able to vanquish the reasons of the misery (p. 90.). Is this really the recipe? Many argue against this statement, but its core concept, namely that the 'German Europe' has emerged, cannot be disputed.

The translation of Beck's work edited by Csaba Jancsák and published by the Belvedere Meridionale is fluent and easy to understand. First and last, the publisher did a fine job: not long after the publication of the original German version, the Beck volume became available in Hungarian which is a praiseworthy accomplishment.

(ULRICH BECK: *A német Európa: Új hatalmi térségek a válság jegyében*³. Ed. by Csaba Jancsák, trans. by Ildikó G. Klement. Belvedere Meridionale, Szeged, 2013. 91 pp.) *

³ The original title: *Das deutsche Europa: Neue Machtlandschaften im Zeichen der Krise* published in Berlin in 2012.