

# Instead of debating the future of Europe, liberals are content with retreating back to the nation-state.

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[Martin Eiermann](#) sees the gloom of the Eurozone crisis clouding out prospects of an integrated Europe. He argues that the crisis has spawned a formidable movement seeking retreat into a compartmentalized world of nation-states. This is dangerous – the political and economic costs of retrenchment are staggeringly high.



“Three months remain for Eurozone rescue, says Lagarde.” “Greeks withdraw billions from nation’s banks.” “100 billion insufficient to prevent further crisis.” “Italy’s economy collapses.” These are just a few of the headlines that have been published in recent days about the Eurozone crisis. For those who aren’t on anti-depressants yet, now might be a good time to find the nearest pharmacy and join the queue.

Today, the “dream of a new Europe” requires a sleep so deep that it borders on unconsciousness. Indeed, there is little room for dreamers at the European negotiating table and in public discussions about the Eurozone crisis. Four years after the beginning of the financial crisis, public opinion is instead marked by feelings of powerlessness, resignation and rejection. Within a few short years, the Eurozone has come to stand as a proxy for misguided integration, expanding bureaucracy, unrestrained debt, and global crisis. A sign of the extent of our doubts is the apparent absence of a positive European narrative; the only language in which we can talk about what Europe should, could and ought to look like appears to be the language of crisis economics.

Historically, peace and freedom provided two cornerstones for the European project and filled discussions about our common future with life and substance. The signatories of the Maastricht treaty could draw on these ideas as much as the opponents of NATO’s “double track” decision in 1979, or dissidents in Eastern Germany (especially after the Helsinki Accords elevated the language of security and cooperation to the level of government policy). Yet that discourse has faltered in recent years. Today, words like “freedom” feature predominantly in the speeches of European skeptics and nostalgic nationalists. More freedom equals less Brussels; fewer rescue funds, a smaller welfare state, and less immigration.

After four years of crisis, a crude mix of libertarian ideology and free-market radicalism has muscled its way from the hinterland of the United States and from seedy beer-hall discussions onto the main stage of European discourse. First, it was loud and aggressive, propagated by those who demanded that Greece be tossed out of the Eurozone or who sought a separate currency for the well-to-do nations of Western and Northern Europe. Now, it also appears in the shape of pseudo-rational criticism of “misguided solidarity” and “fiscal irresponsibility”. Recently, the former European Central Banker and current Goldman Sachs advisor Otmar Issing provided a textbook example of the latter in an essay he penned for the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. To these libertarians, less is usually more, except where the spread of markets is concerned.

The instinctive reaction to crisis is retreat, in this case the retreat into nationalistic isolation and ideological parochialism. We are facing what the poet Jean Paul once described as “happiness through retrenchment” – a movement back into a compartmentalized world of nation-states and into a conservative utopia that never really existed anyways. Indeed, it is rather bizarre that our freedom is now defended not only in the mountains of Afghanistan but also against the people of Greece, ideally armed with the weaponry of austerity. Every man for himself, every nation for itself.

It is Europe’s loss today when the language of freedom becomes married to the unit of the nation-state and the ideology of the free market, and when many reactions to the immense challenge of debt can be reduced to the simplistic mantra that the European periphery must perform better and spend less. It is Europe’s loss

not because the continued integration of Europe is unavoidable (it isn't), but because the political and economic costs of retreat are staggeringly high. Europe's periphery has long been our own backyard, and the calamities in Greece and Portugal and Italy have strong and costly ripple effects that will reverberate throughout the continent.

Yet freedom and peace are still on the European agenda. "Freedom", as graffiti on a London wall succinctly proclaims, "is the joy of agency". Freedom today means that we must no longer feel powerless in light of the twitches of stock exchange indices or helpless under the burden of risky financial practices and growing public debt. Freedom describes our ability to build a common future, to shape not only our own existence but the continental context as well. It is of secondary importance whether the current crisis can best be explained as a failure of markets or as a failure of politics. The effects are similar; many important decisions are not actively chosen but emerge from a diffuse "systemic logic" for which nobody claims responsibility but which affects all of us. The recent Greek elections are a good example of this: it's hard to celebrate the triumph of democracy when the only choice for voters is between the straightjacket of austerity and expulsion from the common currency. Greek discontent might not be rational, but it is certainly understandable. After all, outrage is one of the few outlets available to the powerless.

Peace, too, has not become a *fait accompli*. 67 years after the end of World War II, Europe's social peace is threatened by precarious economic circumstances and rising xenophobia. Living standards and educational opportunities have improved drastically throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and human-on-human violence has declined decade after decade. But at the same time, inequality in Western Europe is as high today as it was during the Great Depression (in Asia and Africa, inequality has reached levels that were last seen in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century). A whole generation of Europeans is growing up to face an uncertain future. None of these problems can be solved on a national level alone. Europe's peace today isn't defended with the power of the sword but through the protective shield of the welfare state and through an embrace of multiculturalism.

When we look at recent electoral results in France, we might ask just how secure that peace really is. It isn't the fault of liberals and libertarians that their pro-austerity demonstrations attract right-wing politicians as well. But it is illuminating to survey those who agitate against the European project, and to observe the crude mixture of parochialism and distrust that has emerged from their ranks.

*A longer version of this article first appeared in German at [The European](#).*

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## **About the author**

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