

Give more power to the European Parliament, says Habermas, the philosopher fighting for Europe

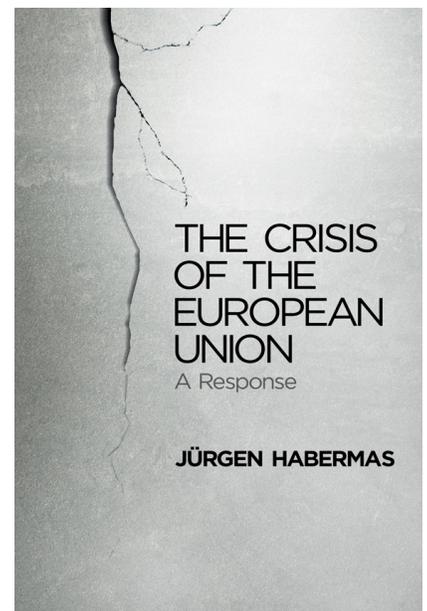
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*In the midst of the current crisis that is threatening to derail the historical project of European unification, **Jürgen Habermas** has been one of the most perceptive critics of the ineffectual and evasive responses to the global financial crisis. In this book, his central argument is that the European project must realize its democratic potential by evolving from an international into a cosmopolitan community. **Natacha Postel-Vinay** finds that although readers will appreciate the philosopher's thoughts on such a topical issue, they might find the journey a bit rough.*



The Crisis of the European Union: A Response. Jürgen Habermas. Polity. April 2012.

Perhaps because of its title, but also because of its author, [Jürgen Habermas](#) – a world famous philosopher and weekly columnist in *Die Zeit* – *The Crisis of the European Union* will attract many a reader interested in topical issues. The unfolding Euro crisis which started a few years ago has raised many questions about the viability of the Euro-zone, the wisdom of decisions taken in Brussels, and the decision-making process itself. Many of these questions have remained unanswered, partly because, as Habermas himself claims in this book, the media are relatively poor at informing the public and generating useful debates around them. Many readers will thus relish the perspective of reading a book dissecting and deciphering current events for them. They might end up disappointed, however.



The book is in fact made up of one main 100-page pamphlet on the state of the European Union and four other short essays by Habermas on the euro crisis or – not sure how it got in there – ‘The concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights.’ Even the reader equipped with some background in political philosophy will probably struggle to understand the aim of the main pamphlet. But the reader is likely to understand somewhere around the beginning that the author is emphasising an absence of contradiction between sovereignty at state and EU levels, somewhere in the middle that the EU has a democratic deficit in its decision-making

process, and somewhere towards the end that this deficit can only be compensated by giving equal power to the European Council and the European Parliament.

To understand these few main points, the reader will have to go through an obstacle course that might not leave them unscathed. First, a discourse on the need for a world cosmopolitan democracy, à la Kant, necessary because of the ever larger amount of transnational exchanges (where the nature of these exchanges, whether cultural or financial, does not seem to matter to Habermas). Second, an effort to remove the “mental block” that popular sovereignty depends conceptually on state sovereignty, using the (questionable) argument that the former can remain within each country while state or “external” sovereignty can shift from state level to the level of a group of countries. Third, an attempt to argue that the unanimity required at the EU level represents a democratic deficit that can be counterbalanced by more power given to the EU Parliament.

In all three cases the argument suffers from lack of clarity. Habermas’s prose is convoluted and repetitive, making his arguments difficult to understand. His tendency to put many words in italics does not help. It is only towards the end that the relatively concrete solution of giving more power to the EU Parliament is put forward. But overall he consistently avoids tackling the more pressing concrete issues that any reader mindful of current events might have in mind. Such issues include, first and foremost, the *kind* of decisions that should be taken at EU level as opposed to state level, but also the *ways* in which the EU Parliament could be given more power and make people feel represented.

The main point of this pamphlet, however (and of the book as whole), is indeed that there is at the moment a democratic deficit and that there should be ways to avoid what Habermas calls “post-democratic executive federalism.” While this point could be put across in a much simpler way, an eminent philosopher’s fight for a more democratic society gives cause for hope. Even here however, Habermas seems to assume that if EU citizens were better represented at the EU level they would agree to decisions being taken at EU level. Some might consider this assumption naïve, and it would be interesting to see this question tackled in the pamphlet. Overall then, readers will appreciate the philosopher’s partisan involvement with such a topical issue, but might find the journey a bit rough.

Natacha Postel-Vinay is a third-year PhD student in the [Department of Economic History](#) at the LSE. She has an undergraduate degree in economics and political science and an MSc in economic history from LSE. She specialises in financial history, and her PhD thesis concentrates on the causes of bank failures in the U.S Great Depression with an emphasis on their behaviour in the 1920s. She also has a particular interest for political and economic philosophy, economic development, and statistical tools for economic investigation. [Read more reviews by Natacha.](#)

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