

Five minutes with Ulrich Beck: “Germany has created an accidental empire”

by Blog Admin

*Are we now living in a German Europe? In an interview with EUROPP editors Stuart A Brown and Chris Gilson, **Ulrich Beck** discusses German dominance of the European Union, the divisive effects of austerity policies, and the relevance of his concept of the ‘risk society’ to the current problems being experienced in the Eurozone.*



How has Germany come to dominate the European Union?

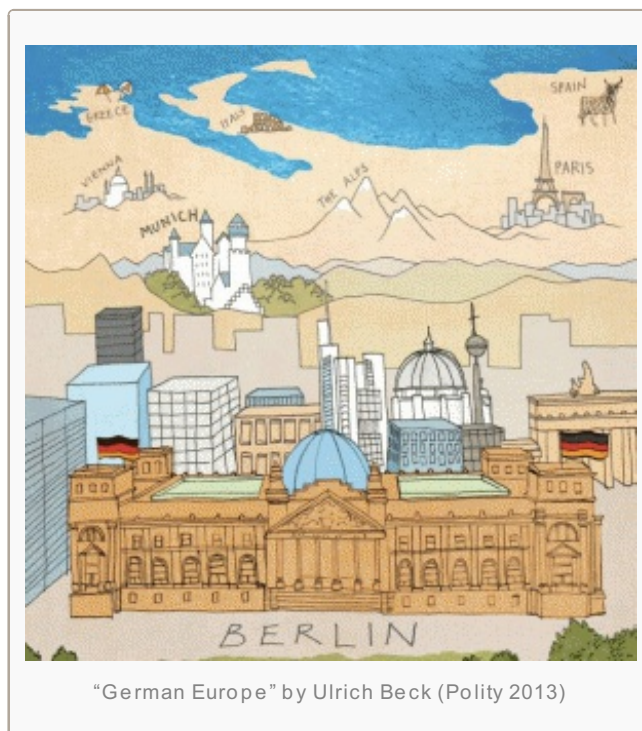
Well it happened somehow by accident. Germany has actually created an ‘accidental empire’. There is no master plan; no intention to occupy Europe. It doesn’t have a military basis, so all the talk about a ‘Fourth Reich’ is misplaced. Rather it has an economic basis – it’s about economic power – and it’s interesting to see how in the anticipation of a European catastrophe, with fears that the Eurozone and maybe even the European Union might break down, the landscape of power in Europe has changed fundamentally.

First of all there’s a split between the Eurozone countries and the non-Eurozone countries. Suddenly for example the UK, which is only a member of the EU and not a member of the Eurozone, is losing its veto power. It’s a tragic comedy how the British Prime Minister is trying to tell us that he is still the one who is in charge of changing the European situation. The second split is that among the Eurozone countries there is an important division of power between the lender countries and the debtor countries. As a result Germany, the strongest economic country, has become the most powerful EU state.

Are austerity policies dividing Europe?

Indeed they are, in many ways. First of all we have a new line of division between northern European and southern European countries. Of course this is very evident, but the background from a sociological point of view is that we are experiencing the redistribution of risk from the banks, through the states, to the poor, the unemployed and the elderly. This is an amazing new inequality, but we are still thinking in national terms and trying to locate this redistribution of risk in terms of national categories.

At the same time there are two leading ideologies in relation to austerity policies. The first is pretty much based on what I call the ‘Merkiavelli’ model – by this I mean a combination of **Niccolò Machiavelli** and Angela Merkel. On a personal level, Merkel takes a long time to make decisions: she’s always waiting until some kind of consensus appears. But this kind of waiting makes the countries depending on Germany’s decision realise that actually Germany holds the power. This deliberate hesitation is quite an interesting strategy in terms of the way that Germany has taken over economically.



The second element is that Germany’s austerity policies are not based simply on pragmatism, but also

underlying values. The German objection to countries spending more money than they have is a moral issue which, from a sociological point of view, ties in with the 'Protestant Ethic'. It's a perspective which has Martin Luther and Max Weber in the background. But this is not seen as a moral issue in Germany, instead it's viewed as economic rationality. They don't see it as a German way of resolving the crisis; they see it as if they are the teachers instructing southern European countries on how to manage their economies.

This creates another ideological split because the strategy doesn't seem to be working so far and we see many forms of protest, of which Cyprus is the latest example. But on the other hand there is still a very important and powerful neo-liberal faction in Europe which continues to believe that austerity policies are the answer to the crisis.

Is the Eurozone crisis proof that we live in a risk society?

Yes, this is the way I see it. My idea of the risk society could easily be misunderstood because the term 'risk' actually signifies that we are in a situation to cope with uncertainty, but to me the risk society is a situation in which we are *not* able to cope with the uncertainty and consequences that we produce in society.

I make a distinction between 'first modernity' and our current situation. First modernity, which lasted from around the 18th century until perhaps the 1960s or 1970s, was a period where there was a great deal of space for experimentation and we had a lot of answers for the uncertainties that we produced: probability models, insurance mechanisms, and so on. But then because of the success of modernity we are now producing consequences for which we don't have any answers, such as climate change and the financial crisis. The financial crisis is an example of the victory of a specific interpretation of modernity: neo-liberal modernity after the breakdown of the Communist system, which dictates that the market is the solution and that the more we increase the role of the market, the better. But now we see that this model is failing and we don't have any answers.

We have to make a distinction between a *risk* society and a *catastrophe* society. A catastrophe society would be one in which the motto is 'too late': where we give in to the panic of desperation. A risk society in contrast is about the anticipation of future catastrophes in order to prevent them from happening. But because these potential catastrophes are not supposed to happen – the financial system could collapse, or nuclear technology could be a threat to the whole world – we don't have the basis for experimentation. The rationality of calculating risk doesn't work anymore. We are trying to anticipate something that is not supposed to happen, which is an entirely new situation.

Take Germany as an example. If we look at Angela Merkel, a few years ago she didn't believe that Greece posed a major problem, or that she needed to engage with it as an issue. Yet now we are in a completely different situation because she has learned that if you look into the eyes of a potential catastrophe, suddenly new things become possible. Suddenly you think about new institutions, or about the fiscal compact, or about a banking union, because you anticipate a catastrophe which is not supposed to happen. This is a huge mobilising force, but it's highly ambivalent because it can be used in different ways. It could be used to develop a new vision for Europe, or it could be used to justify leaving the European Union.

How should Europe solve its problems?

I would say that the first thing we have to think about is what the purpose of the European Union actually is. Is there any purpose? Why Europe and not the whole world? Why not do it alone in Germany, or the UK, or France?

I think there are four answers in this respect. First, the European Union is about enemies becoming neighbours. In the context of European history this actually constitutes something of a miracle. The second purpose of the European Union is that it can prevent countries from being lost in world politics. A post-European Britain, or a post-European Germany, is a lost Britain, and a lost Germany. Europe is part of what makes these countries important from a global perspective.

The third point is that we should not only think about a new Europe, we also have to think about how the European nations have to change. They are part of the process and I would say that Europe is about redefining the national interest in a European way. Europe is not an obstacle to national sovereignty; it is the necessary means to improve national sovereignty. Nationalism is now the enemy of the nation because only through the European Union can these countries have genuine sovereignty.

The fourth point is that European modernity, which has been distributed all over the world, is a suicidal project. It's producing all kinds of basic problems, such as climate change and the financial crisis. It's a bit like if a car company created a car without any brakes and it started to cause accidents: the company would take these cars back to redesign them and that's exactly what Europe should do with modernity. Reinventing modernity could be a specific purpose for Europe.

Taken together these four points form what you could say is a grand narrative of Europe, but one basic issue is missing in the whole design. So far we've thought about things like institutions, law, and economics, but we haven't asked what the European Union means for individuals. What do individuals gain from the European project? First of all I would say that, particularly in terms of the younger generation, more Europe is producing more freedom. It's not only about the free movement of people across Europe; it's also about opening up your own perspective and living in a space which is essentially grounded on law.

Second, European workers, but also students as well, are now confronted with the kind of existential uncertainty which needs an answer. Half of the best educated generation in Spanish and Greek history lack any future prospects. So what we need is a vision for a social Europe in the sense that the individual can see that there is not necessarily social security, but that there is less uncertainty. Finally we need to redefine democracy from the bottom up. We need to ask how an individual can become engaged with the European project. In that respect I have made a manifesto, along with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, called "[We Are Europe](#)", arguing that we need a free year for everyone to do a project in another country with other Europeans in order to start a European civil society.

A more detailed discussion of the topics covered in this article is available in Ulrich Beck's latest book, [German Europe](#) (Polity 2013)

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