

# 'Crisis, What Crisis?' On the Virtues of Muddling Through in European Politics

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Eurocrisis in the  
Press

By [Henry Radice](#)

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As a Europe on tenterhooks awaits the next development in the Cypriot crisis this weekend, the sense of popular disenchantment with the European project across much of the continent seems to echo a famous passage by Antonio Gramsci:

*"If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e., is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant', exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies.... The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."* [1]

Current public discourse across Europe would seem, to a sometimes surprising extent, to be Gramscian, at least in terms of applying the diagnosis above to the current euro crisis. Such voices take for granted that we are in the midst of a euro crisis that is not just a crisis of the euro currency, but also a profound existential crisis of the European Union as a political construct. But is this really the case? While the indicators of economic crisis are relatively easy to grasp, the indicators of political crisis are harder to decipher. What does it mean to say that the EU is in crisis, rather than just facing a crisis or crises?

Barack Obama made the obvious, but often forgotten [point](#) last year that the issues that reach his desk tend to be unsolvable, because otherwise they would already have been solved. This reminds us both that all political institutions worth their salt are to a great extent crisis management mechanisms, and that where we turn to in times of crisis, however resentfully, is actually a rather good indicator of political significance. Up to a certain point, some unpredictable tipping point of illegitimacy, a good test of a political institution's resilience is not whether it acts to the satisfaction of all, but whether it continues to be invoked as a source of authority or as an appropriate forum for decision-making in the face of the most intractable of problems. For example, the manifold failings of the United Nations Security Council have understandably led to numerous calls for its reform, but still it looms large in the political imaginary, and it is almost impossible to imagine the international political landscape without it anytime soon.

In response to the global financial crisis, Craig Calhoun has argued that:

*"using the word crisis is commonly a way to try to get people to take action, to indicate that we have no choice but to do something. It is performative, not merely descriptive. It is a call to action. And so the very naming of a crisis—and the repeating of the name in a million newspaper articles, political speeches, and dinner-table conversations—actually helps to constitute it. The definitions that gain currency focus attention, suggest what courses of action are appropriate, and even invoke different pre-crisis histories."* [2]

Crisis can be a particular mode of politics which, rather than fundamentally subverting the influence of a particular institution, merely represents the struggle to define the parameters of that institution's subsequent course of action. In the EU's case, it is quite possible that the current crisis will in fact enhance its importance as a site of political negotiation for EU member states, if the various crises the EU faces continue to require the response of the EU, both as a set of related institutions, and as a broader concert of member states.

These crises are of course serious. The Eurozone's troubles have led to much genuine suffering and serious political turbulence. Anti-European populist movements seem to be gaining traction, nourished by pre-existing

concerns about democratic deficits in political Europe. But many of the options on the table for dealing with the current crises involve some degree of fiscal and political consolidation, implying an institutional strengthening, rather than weakening of the EU. Moreover, in terms of weathering political opposition, the preceding decade demonstrated that the EU could survive set-backs such as 'no' votes in referenda and muddle through.

The term 'muddling through' is key here. Arguably the euro crisis is a crisis of an ideal of European politics, not a crisis of its reality. The EU has often moved forward as a result of sometimes painful compromise in the past, which is only to be expected in a continually-increasing club of member states with divergent interests and circumstances. Convergence around a single idea of what European politics should be has appeared increasingly elusive in recent years, seemingly eroded along with other broad-based political consensuses and loyalties, but it was probably always something of a chimera anyway. *Pace* our contemporary Gramscians of fortune, perhaps this is a sign of EU politics coming of age, maturing into a fractious but essential framework for political discourse and debate across Europe, not the last gasps of a dying political structure.

Of course, the language of crisis is both powerful and fickle. The quote in this post's title is often thought to have contributed to the downfall of James Callaghan's Labour government in 1979. Yet Callaghan [never uttered it](#). What future awaits Cyprus, and what consequences might this have for the European Union? Prediction is a mug's game here. Calhoun reminds us of the contingencies at stake. "Crises call attention to social problems, but they open a variety of possible futures." [3] Some of the possible futures for Europe may be bleak. But we should nevertheless pause to ask ourselves what success looks like for political Europe in 2013? Maybe, just maybe, success looks like a crisis.

[1] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 275-6, quoted in William K. Carroll, "Crisis, movements, counter-hegemony: in search of the new", *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* 2, no. 2 (2010): 171.

[2] Craig Calhoun, "Series Introduction: From the Current Crisis to Possible Futures", in Craig Calhoun and Georgi Derluguian (eds.), *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown* (New York: Social Science Research Council and New York University Press, 2011), 10.

[3] Ibid.