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‘Are we still good Europeans?’ Jürgen Habermas and the Italian crisis

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Abstract

This essay focuses on recent Habermas’s reflection upon the ‘Italian crisis’, with the aim to investigate the connection between his recent essayistic production on the crisis of European Union and the speech delivered in Berlin on July 4, 2018, when he was awarded the German-French Journalist Prize. He shed light on the ‘Italian crisis’ and European incapability to realize the specific needs of the poorer member states, which risk being overwhelmed by old and new populisms fired by anti-migrant and anti-liberal rhetoric. Habermas’s speech, entitled *Are we still good Europeans?*, can be interpreted as a sample of ‘quality press’, useful to build a coherent public sphere founded on ‘considered public opinions’. Thus, Habermas’s journalistic insights allow us to update his assertions about the future of the European Union which he already focused on in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (2008), *The Crisis of the European Union* (2011) and *The Lure of Technocracy* (2013). The Italian political crisis is also a communicative affair, as Habermas points out criticizing German stubbornness in approving economic austerity, thus neglecting the looming risks of incommunicability between national and supra-national governances.

Keywords: cultural information, public opinion, press, European identity, media influence, crisis.

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1. A methodological (and bibliographical) preface

This essay deals with the concept of the 'Italian crisis' that Habermas suggested on July 4, 2018, when he was awarded the German-French Journalist Prize. Habermas's speech, entitled *Are we still good Europeans?*, continues to deal with the issues and topics stressed in his previous work about the European Crisis. Those reflections provide relevant food for thought upon the construction of a solid European Union and the difficulties that some member countries, e.g. Italy, have to endure when confronted with the normative and financial parameters imposed by Brussels.

Thus, the outcome of the research revolves around the possibility to expand the analysis from the abovementioned speech to the essays dealing with the future of Europe and the role played by intellectuals (2008). Habermas's hint at public issues implies the reference to the quality press and anti-liberal rhetoric: the former is essential to the construction of a European public sphere, the latter is related to the diffusion of new forms of populism. Habermas probed these topics in his two books on the crisis of the European Union (2012) and the lure of technocracy (2014).

Hence follows the opportunity to focus on the Berlin speech delivered on July 4, 2018, which was promptly published in several European newspapers. For this reason, the speech is an example of the quality press, despite the influence generated by television: 'But there is an informal hierarchy, which accords the national quality press – that is, the national daily and weekly newspapers and the weekly political magazines – the role of opinion leaders in inter-media agenda setting' (Habermas, 2019: 169-170).

Habermas's criticism of the press evokes social, political and communicative matters that appear both complex and wide-reaching, thus requiring more in-depth bibliographical references. The construction of the European public sphere has been thoroughly analyzed by Hepp *et al.* (2016), Belluati (2015), Bee e Bozzini (2010). The reference to the Italian crisis unveils European informative contradictions as they have also been surveyed by Bellucci and Conti (2012).

This paper alludes to the issue linked to the social influence of the quality press: this is why the journalistic strategies featuring the digital age should be probed, as Gleick (2012), Valentini (2012), Parito (2012) and Marini (2006) have previously done. Furthermore, Habermas disapproves of a post-modern concept of crisis, especially when he refers to the diffusion of populism on a global scale. In this context, the work carried out by Mudde (2017), Albertazzi and McDonnell (2016) helps us understand the evolution and radicalization of populism, thus enabling a thorough reflection upon the relations between politics and communication.

In the light of the scope and complexity of the topics examined in the paper, this introduction should be read as a clarification of the mission and the methodology adopted in this essay to investigate Habermas's analysis approach towards the Italian and the European crises against a backdrop of complex communicative and political emergencies involving the role played by intellectuals and journalists in the process of the construction of a cohesive European culture.

2. Media opinions and quality issues: notes on the European future

In his speech delivered in Berlin on July 4, 2018, on the occasion of awarding the German-French Journalist Prize, Habermas focused on some of the most relevant difficulties afflicting the European Union over the last few months. In particular, he dwelt on the Italian crisis and the ongoing anti-European outbursts, concerning the worries about uncontrolled migration flows and economic fluctuations.

In his speech, entitled *Are still we good Europeans?* (published by The Zeit Online along with the English translation, on July 6, 2018), the German sociologist suggested some possible solutions to the institutional short-circuits produced by the juxtaposition of national and supra-national expectations triggered by economic, social and communicative inputs as well. In this account, the analysis of the infrastructure of public opinion developed in *Europe: The Faltering Project* may help us realize that the ongoing European crisis has not only an economic origin, but also a communicative and symbolic background (Habermas, 2009).

The interaction between state, civil society and functional subsystems marks the traditional communicative frames of national public opinions, which risk being overwhelmed by the globalized 'arenas of political opinion'. Twelve years later the analysis of the public sphere laid down in the essay *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy still have an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research* (Habermas, 2009: 138-183), Habermas highlighted the drawbacks (both economic and communicative) engendered by German financial supremacy: such a crisis might have been fueled by the need to reduce the public debt and to control the single countries' budgets, so as to avoid the centrifugal forces that led to Brexit.

The attempts to undermine the stability of the European Union now seem to involve Italy, especially in the light of the feeling of uncertainty feeding mistrust and hardships. Furthermore, the awareness of living in a risk society is empowered by the physical and psychological dangers produced by

our environments, both private and public (Beck, 2016). Media representation of worldwide disasters (including earthquakes, wars and natural cataclysms) emphasizes such a shifting scenario, marked by the permanent reproducibility of uncertainty (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1990).

This is why the quality press should help us reflect more attentively on the interpretative keys provided by the countless points of view and cognitive suggestions stemming from our media consumption. Hence follows the importance of the quality press underlined by Habermas in his 2006 essay, in which he wondered how public spheres work and deal with overlapping news.

Does informed public relevance still build the traditional agenda setting, partially renewed by the diffusion of the internet and social networks? And what does Habermas intend with the expression 'press quality'? How might it be possible to distinguish the good press from the bad? In this account, Habermas focused on the informative role played by 'public opinions' diffused by the so called 'media professionals': journalists, intellectuals, lobbyists and politicians were the principle actors in the 'forum of the public sphere', as mainly characterized by the mainstream flow of information (Habermas, 2009: 158-167).

Soon after the advent of digital society, social actors attained new communicative relevance empowered by the permanent connectivity of our times. This is the era of globalization, as described by Ulrich Beck in reference to the 'politics of visibility' fueled by the new sharing potential provided by the Internet (Beck, 2016: 128).

The diffusion of social networks and online information made any single actor capable of taking part in the public sphere forum, as it is subject to the influence of digitalized actors. Democracy and participation are two strategic keywords of the ongoing renovation process, sometimes encumbered by lack of transparency and inclusion (Ducci, 2017).

As a result, hate speeches and fake news are only some of the 'public bads' afflicting our digital communities, which are dependent on the instantaneous exchanges of images, messages, experiences. The advent of the reproducible society made possible the immanent gratification of participative expectations, supported by the new communicative awareness. These changes influence political communication as well, especially in times marked by the contrast between national and extra-national institutions.

This is what Habermas emphasizes in some recent works focused on the economic and social uncertainties undermining the future of the European Union. The communicative scenario described in *The Crisis of European Union: a Response* (2011) and *The Lure of Technocracy* (2013) suggests some pressing reflections about the construction of a solid European public opinion, which

should be nurtured by the juxtaposition of national and extra-national pressures. To the fore are the so called 'reflected public opinions', stemming from communicative exchanges among intellectuals, experts, politicians, rulers. The diffusion of these opinions should stimulate the construction of more and more connected communicative arenas, especially thanks to the hyper-connectivity permeating our daily life (Kelty, 2013).

Therefore, we may wonder whether the old media system has been definitely replaced by new digital devices, whose presence is embedded in collective and individual experience. Ten years ago, Habermas dwelt on the description of public sphere forums and the overlapping of reflected public opinions produced not only by journalists and politicians, but also by advocates, churches, intellectuals and non-governmental organizations (Habermas, 2009).

Public opinions are inspired by the convergence of different informative inputs, made potentially authoritative by the socio-political relevance of communicative actors. In the presence of such complex environments, cross-mediality appears to be the real keystone of our daily existences, since it is entangled with the eagerness to share experiences (Boccia Artieri, 2015).

Furthermore, the outcome of the communicative act investigated by Habermas over a long period has deeply changed in relation to the different interactional needs pressing upon the hyper-connected actors (Privitera, 2001; Rosati, 1994). From a political point of view, this symbolic acceleration seems to advantage the construction of a wider public sphere, which Habermas deals with in his most recent essays and articles, including the one published for the award ceremony of the German-French Journalist Prize. These texts allow us to understand how Habermas analyzes the advent of digital public spheres. In the meantime, they underline the profound political implications of such institutional chaos as was engendered by the implosion of national boundaries, both economic, political and interactional (Triandafillydou, Gropas, 2015; Niesen, 2001).

Habermas focuses on the influence once exerted by the quality press when university professors, intellectuals, writers and philosophers had the chance to suggest reliable reflections about ongoing changing tendencies. The bourgeois civilization has been replaced by the cross-media society, which was investigated by Silverstone so as to emphasize the cooperation between old and new media: 'On-line democracy, electronic town halls and referendums, these are the stuff of the new political rhetoric which does indeed see technology as politics' (Silverstone, 1999: 26).

The incumbency of drawbacks connected to the digital commitment would not prevent us from attending to our globalized environments and fueling our informative consumption imbued as they are with foreign news.

The fascination of connectivity fires the lure of technocracy, featuring the construction of European public opinion. The metamorphosis of our world strictly depends on the slow but unstoppable passing of local identities, often overwhelmed by the journalistic narration of European affairs. In the light of a changing scenario, the description of the input and output of the public sphere suggested by Habermas in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (2009).

Starting from the diffusion of digital communities, the proactive condition of social actors increased along with the unconsciousness of risks correlated to incautious overexposure. Thus, information seems to be increasingly inspired by the ‘institutionalized discourses and negotiations’ once suggested by mainstream media and nowadays diffused by social media and Internet. The space reserved to intellectuals and thinkers is inexorably reducing, despite the proliferation of blogs and chat focused on cultural reflection.

The presence of the so called ‘quality press’ should testify to the intellectual degree of public opinion, despite the crisis of printed journalism (Gregoratto, 2013). In this account, Habermas investigates the concept of ‘quality press’ relating it to the difficulties in analyzing public opinions (in particular the published ones) belonging to the traditional way to view journalistic communication:

Public opinions are hard to pin down empirically. In the final analysis they are the result of an intuitive bridging of the perceived differences between the *published* opinions, which are strongly shaped by the quality press on the one hand and by the representative spectrum of polled opinions reflected in the survey data on the other. Thus they are the imponderable outcomes of the efforts of opinion-forming elites and of the more or less conscious relations of a broad and diverse mass audience (Habermas, 2009: 165).

Along with quality press and polled opinions, votes may determine the influence of published (or spoken) opinions on wide strata of population, whose feedback opportunity comes with general elections. The recent Italian election results indicate a diffused sense of unease caused by the European Union’s disinterest for the most relevant problems afflicting the country, especially those regarding economy and migration. Governmental inability to cope with such social and public emergencies became an utter electoral crash, which was also caused by the populist defense of national identity (Brunkhorst, 2017).

Therefore the contrast between the Italian and European governments risks being exasperated by different approaches in facing the current economic contingency. Once again, Europe seems to totter, as Habermas pointed out in

the speech given in Berlin on July 4, 2018. Published by several newspapers, his article deals with the supremacy of Germany and France inside the European Union: his purpose was to emphasize their unconditioned control upon the other countries, including Italy.

Things may change in the presence of a new changing public sphere, hopefully more and more persuaded of the negative consequences produced by economic severity. The Italian crisis may be the last chance for Europe to approve a different political approach that might be more suitable to the needs of the single countries. This is why Habermas's article may be presented as a sample of quality press, so useful for the ongoing debate about the future of the European identity (D'Ambrosi, 2019; Cornia, 2010).

3. Are still we good Europeans? A sample of quality press

I think of Jürgen Habermas as the proponent of a modern, constitutional patriotism which sets no ethnic, historical or geographical limits, but which instead, in its universality, transcends borders. And I think also of his contributions in the face of the challenges of the modern technological age, such as his warning against the fragmentation of the public sphere as a consequence of the digital revolution (Maas, 2018).

These are the inaugural words of the speech delivered by Heiko Mass, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs in Germany, on the occasion of the presentation of the Franco-German Prize for Journalism to Professor Jürgen Habermas. Created in 1983, the Prize aims to promote mutual understanding of political, economic, social and cultural realities in France and Germany. The Prize is awarded in four categories: video, audio, the written press and multimedia.

The written press prize was bestowed on Habermas for his journalistic commitment, which has constantly focused on the main political affairs regarding the European scenario, both from a political and a cultural point of view. The analysis of Habermas's speech may help us realize the relevance that a great philosopher and sociologist may still have in interpreting the complexity of our daily life, ruled by technocracy and bureaucracy. The communicative speedup bolstered by the Internet and social networks imposes a thorough reflection on the representative strategies fostered by old and new media in the era of frequent collisions between nationalisms and globalization (Privitera, 2017).

Fundamentally, Habermas's speech revolves around some current contradictions afflicting the strengthening of the European Union, whose solidity is increasingly undermined by the mandatory respect of rigid

economic parameters. The decisions taken in Meseberg on July 4, 2018 about the opportunity to create the European budget were underlined by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, so as to reinforce that ‘Germany and France are now moving forward together in Europe on the further development of the Eurozone, the shaping of the digital future and most especially on foreign, security and defence policy’ (Maas, 2018).

Habermas had already laid out in his most recent volumes the risks involving the Eurozone. His works are inspired by the will to cope with the uneasy kinship between local and foreign cultures. And the speech delivered in Berlin on July 4, 2018 effectively shows the chance to approve a quality analysis on the ongoing social and economic shifts, along with the drawbacks that the European Union is hardly likely to solve. The awarding of the Franco-German Prize for journalism may confirm that it is still possible to influence the public sphere by means of the authority of knowledge and science, thus endowing journalism with a rare but desirable intellectual bias (Morcellini, 2011; Sorrentino, 2008).

In this sense, Habermas’s speech shows intelligent criticism of the current European economic policies, which are blamed for their rigor. France and Germany should take into account the necessities of the single states in facing internal difficulties, as Italy is doing from an economic point of view. Moscovici and Junker harshly criticized the Italian government’s decision to increase the deficit level to 2.4%: their reproaches imply the fears of the European government for the risks of economic default.

The spectrum of a new Greek case may legitimate such a censorial approach, despite Italian situation requiring much more attention, especially in reference to migration and safety issues. Once again, national interests collide with higher demands supported by supra-national pressures. As a result, the national public sphere is increasingly overwhelmed by the international public spheres focused on the economic and political priorities. The role played by digital media is decisive, insofar as the new informative frames are engendered by the convergence of mainstream and personal devices (Born, 2013).

The voice of ‘nongovernmental organizations, advocates, experts, intellectuals’ (Habermas, 2009: 166) has particular informative relevance, especially when famous scientists, sociologists and thinkers stimulate the debate about the future of our connected societies. This means that intellectuals may still influence the power structures of the public sphere and the dynamics of mass communication. This is what Habermas strives to demonstrate with his speech, aimed at wondering whether we are all ‘good Europeans’. Furthermore, he points out that the ‘Italian crisis is perhaps the

last chance to reflect on the obscenity of a currency union' imposing strict rules and normative boundaries.

Even though 'public opinions are hard to pin down empirically', Habermas does not hesitate in emphasizing the Italian public opinion's disappointment in the German and French stance, potentially underestimating the centrifugal forces undermining the future existence of the European Union as a whole. In the long run, the existence of a public sphere skeptical of European inaction would lead to a general lack of participation, thus fostering the sense of distrust pervading European institutions. This is why Habermas has no hesitation in reproaching his country for the indolence shown in the presence of these centrifugal tendencies.

As a result, he sheds light on one of the more pressing issue regarding European politicians, that is to say 'the lack of cooperation in the EU'. The controversial debate between Junker and the Italian government shows the deep divergences on the economic strategies to pursue in order to defend national interests yet without undermining the 'Eurozone' balance. Habermas criticizes German ideas of solidarity and austerity in reference to the role played by France in the international scenario too: 'My impression is that Emmanuel Macron's appearance on the European stage has exposed just such a weak spot in the self-image of those Germans who patted themselves on the back during the euro crisis, convinced as they were that they remained the best Europeans and were pulling everyone else out of the quagmire' (Habermas, 2018).

Habermas reappraises Germany's alleged supremacy in ruling European affairs. He blames in particular the '*mauvaise foi*' inspiring the definition of the European policies concerning several aspects of our lives, which are increasingly ruled by normative boundaries: 'Allow me to add that the imputation of such a *mauvaise foi* does not imply moral reproach. Those afflicted are neither completely to blame nor entirely free of blame for the rotten state of such a belief structure, decaying as it is from the inside out' (Habermas, 2018). In the presence of such a centrifugal momentum, Germany keeps on claiming the authority to rule Union's life, thus showing that indolence once featuring the conduct of monks:

In this respect, our German pro-Europeanness is not dissimilar to the rather different phenomenon of the frame of mind apparently widespread among the monks in the Cistercian monasteries of the 11th century who were beset by qualms about their faith and who consequently fell into a melancholic torpor. This dejection, which came to be known as '*acedia*', was not punished as a sin because it did not transgress the cognitive threshold of explicit heresy (Habermas, 2018).

The state of mind marking German pro-Europeanness recalls that state of torpor triggered not only by indolence and tolerance, but also by the melancholy stemming from that dejection afflicting people who are aware of their doubts. Nevertheless, uncertainty is not a crime, until it leads to crime. Up to a certain point, 'acedia' is not punishable, unless it turns into heresy. The keyword of the current situation may be 'qualm': doubts and hesitation seem to inspire most of the countries sharing the Eurozone, despite Germany's stubborn obstinacy in maintaining political and economic predominance in Europe.

Therefore, the German indolence is not so far from the so called 'monk's illness', ironically cited by Habermas to highlight the pathological aspects of European policies:

On the other hand, this so-called 'monk's illness' likewise did not fulfill the clinical definition of depression – which would have exonerated those concerned of all responsibility. The monks were not disciplined for their acedia but were expected to take some responsibility themselves. It is precisely this vacillating, this blurring of the lines of accountability, that characterises the profane *mauvaise foi*, as well (Habermas, 2018).

By quoting Sartre's *mauvaise foi*, Habermas wants to shed light on the lack of *bonne foi* characterizing European governance, whose purpose should be to solve the countless problems troubling the single local situations. Medieval sloth seems to match contemporary indifference, masked by the boasted principles of loyalty, solidarity, good faith, altruism. Nonetheless, the qualms of a wobbly faith may represent diffidence and indecision. The latter may be empowered by globalization and worldwide tensions. According to Habermas, this sense of perplexity seems not to involve Angela Merkel, reproached for her ambiguous use of the terms 'solidarity' and 'loyalty'.

Habermas underlines the way Merkel refers 'loyalty' to economic actions, which should be described in terms of 'solidarity'. However, joint political action should require solidarity rather than loyalty, often referring to economic and professional contexts. The juxtaposition of ethical, political and economic dimensions engenders that confusion stigmatized by Habermas as a risky communicative drawback, since it may produce confusion and diffidence in public opinions (Florida, 2017; Corchia, 2009).

This dichotomy between loyalty and solidarity inspires his social analysis of the European crisis: he ponders whether it may be fed by the general indifference of Germany and France, up to a certain point self-legitimizing their economic supremacy. Nevertheless, they do not consider the

emergencies affecting Greece, Italy and Spain about migration policies and safety issues. The gravity of such situations has led to political havoc (especially in Italy), also fueled by the European lack of consideration. In too many cases, Germany has underestimated the economic and social troubles that single countries are facing because of the negative consequences of foreign policies.

The rise of political tensions, along with the advance of old and new populisms, implies the threat of centrifugal expectations in the single countries affected by social fractures, political uncertainty and employment precariousness: 'Populism must be understood as a kind of mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality. It is not much a coherent ideological tradition as a set of ideas that, in the real world, appears in combination with quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ideologies' (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 6).

Therefore, solidarity and loyalty sound like obsolete principles, endowed – as they are – with an evocative meaning and metaphoric implications. Habermas's statement seems to echo Durkheim's reflections about mechanical and organic solidarity, still useful to realize the phenomenology of socialization in compliance with the development of social environments.

In the era marked by the eagerness of consumption, solidarity appears to lose its philosophical implications, so as to be trivialized into a populist communicative tool: 'Solidarity is a term that describes the mutually trusting relationship between two actors who have become part of a joint political project of their own free will. Solidarity is not charity, and it is certainly not a form of conditioning for the advantage of one of the actors' (Habermas, 2018).

This is what Habermas asserts when he focuses on Angela Merkel's ambiguity, which will inevitably surface through national discontent. In the presence of such a potential for impoverishment, economic issues have overwhelmed the ethical implications of political involvement, so closely linked to electoral needs and party interests. This is why Habermas emphasizes the disquieting mistrust of citizens towards both national and European policies, thus implementing the threat of deficit default: 'The compulsory, rigid conditions for so-called solidarity aid clearly exposes the lack of such a foundation of trust – and the hollowness of our self-image as good Europeans' (Habermas, 2018).

How is it possible to be 'good Europeans' if distrust and suspicion are wedged in public opinion? How do media influence such a sense of dismay for the wobbly solidarity inspiring political actions? And, finally, can a great thinker influence the approach of his own country towards political and

economic policies? The metaphor of ‘good Europeans’ hardly conceals the doubts about any real chance to build a cohesive community formed by different and (sometimes) divergent specificities.

Speculation, the banking union, insolvency procedures, the monetary fund, fiscal stabilization are some of the key words inspiring the ‘convergent economic developments’ (Habermas, 2018). These are fueled by the European Central Bank, which sometimes neglects the internal pressures that any single country has to cope with. Recent quarrels between the Italian government and Junker and Moscovici (regarding the approval of Italian financial maneuvering) confirm the propriety of Habermas’s observations in his speech delivered in July 2018, whose second part is focused on Italy’s crisis, defined ‘the last chance’ for Europe to quit the principle of economic austerity: ‘The Italian crisis is perhaps the last chance to reflect on the obscenity of a currency union which imposes a strict system of rules to the benefit of its strongest member states but does not in compensation provide the latitude for joint political action on the European level’ (Habermas, 2018).

The sociologist underlines the profound contradiction between financial policies destined to benefit the strongest countries and the tendency to defend internal interests. Thus he emphasizes the hypocritical declared intent to safeguard common cohabitation. Habermas points out that political reinforcement of the euro is more important than migration issues or foreign trade policies, even though Germany and other member state are so attentive to these topics. Germany’s internal claims could not be fulfilled without a real convergence on the issues denounced by the weakest countries in terms of flexibility and tolerance (Galeotti, 2010).

Without a more flexible approach, any attempt to attain coherence and stability would lead to failure. The road to cohesion is paved with several attempts to persuade public opinion of the importance of European policies, unfortunately ruled by austerity and ‘loyalty’. In this account, the Italian political situation continues to alarm European civil servants, who are worried about the determination of the Italian government to overshoot the ratio between deficit and PIL.

Furthermore, the 2018 Italian election results showed the rise of populist forces, coalescing in their intention to loosen the grip of European economic control. Hence follow old and new populisms, sometimes fed by popular dissatisfaction. Habermas highlights the risks connected to the anti-migrant prejudices he considers triggered by the fear of inclusion and lack of safety:

Right-wing populism may feed off anti-migrant prejudice and the fears of modernization rampant in the middle class, but symptoms are not the illness itself. The underlying cause of political regression is the palpable

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disappointment that the EU in its current state is more than merely lacking the necessary political efficacy to counteract the trends of growing social inequality within and between its member states. First and foremost, right-wing populism is benefiting from the widespread perception that the EU lacks the political will *to become* politically effective (Habermas, 2018).

The rise of right-wing populisms not only in Italy, but also in Austria, Greece, Spain, France and Norway, must be interpreted as clear evidence of a democratic counter-tendency, which risks being nourished by the myth of authority and the need for order and respect of laws.

Habermas hints at the Italian political evolution in terms of the collective concern that the hypocrisy of Germany and France seem to remove, despite the efforts aimed at persuading public opinion about the dangers lurking outside the Eurozone. Being good Europeans implies the respect of such economic austerity – Habermas underlines –, thus neglecting the profound differences among the northern and southern member States.

The current reformist process involving the European Union is destined to have significant social consequences, also in the light of the ongoing globalization entangled by conflicts, tensions, terrorism. Trump's decision to apply customs duties to foreign goods might hide the secret will to undermine Europe's economic organization, along with its wobbly political patterns.

The lack of a solid unifying policy surely influences the Italian public sphere: people get used to daily media narration reporting the contrasts between the two different ways to view economic and political development. The diatribe between Salvini and Junker sounds like the clash of two opposite social visions, following two different political approaches. Old and new populisms exploit the alleged *mauvaise foi* of Junker and Moscovici, who appear stubbornly determined not to allow the member states to drift away from EU parameters.

The Italian crisis is more than an alarm bell for the Euro Union, which Habermas considers undermined not only by election results, but also by media discourses dealing with the ongoing dire straits affecting our communities. He tries to demonstrate that it is worth wondering whether we are still good Europeans, thus updating his previous reflections published in *The Crisis of the European Union: a Response* and *The Lure of Technocracy*. The lack of social legitimacy of European institutions risks weakening the European Union itself, both in terms of democratic safeguard and economic assistance.

'On paper, supra-national democracy may be the declared long-term goal' (Habermas, 2015: 11). This is what Habermas wrote ahead of the worrying political crisis affecting some member states, including Italy. In the long run, democracy should match loyalty and solidarity, terms that should

become two strategic keywords of the media discourse about the unsteady condition of good Europeans (Maus, 1995).

4. New Italian populisms and the lure of ‘mediocracy’

Habermas’s aforementioned speech delivered in Berlin on July 4, 2018 highlights some relevant issues about the ‘faltering project’ of Europe, which he sees stubbornly founded on economic austerity and a supra-national mindset. Habermas is engaged in a meaningful communicative challenge, aimed to persuade European rulers to fuel a different cohesive policy, founded as much as possible on the need to foster inclusion and solidarity (Habermas, 2009).

In regard to this, Habermas points out that the German concept of loyalty and solidarity sounds hypocritical and precarious, thus echoing the clever reflections developed by Bauman (1989) in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Solidarity among the strongest people does not imply the necessary attention for the weakest individuals, who are seldom capable of exploiting the myth of the European dream (Rifkin, 2004).

Therefore, Habermas knows how close the relationship between social care and individual thoroughness should be, fostered increasingly by social and mainstream media. In the absence of such a cooperative effort, Europe will fail to achieve its main goal, which concerns the free circulation of people and goods within the boundaries of the Union.

To the fore is the construction of a more dynamic form of citizenship to be based on democracy and solidarity (Günther, 2016). In concrete, these achievements collide with the technocratic mindset of European representatives, whose economic mindset is closely connected to their professional mission. Such lack of legitimacy of the supra-national actors might produce a deficit of democratization, as denounced by Habermas in 2013:

Thus *the delayed democratization* is presented as a promise in the manner of a light at the end of the tunnel. With this strategy the Commission is, of course, also serving the usual interest of the executive in expanding its power. But its primary objective seems to be to offer a platform on which groups with different political orientations can unite (Habermas, 2015: 11).

Habermas’s plea for European solidarity is inspired by the awareness of the rift between purposes and outcomes, as it is hampered by red-tape as well. The reference to the ‘political orientation’ involves the communicative dimension of such a ‘faltering project’, which appears affected by symbolic

and value divergence. These tendencies were evident ten years ago, as Habermas emphasized in *The Crisis of the European Union*: 'Politics no longer encounters social problems only within the institutional framework of nation states but, insofar as these problems have a cross-border character, as objects of intergovernmental regulations. After two or three decades of unprecedented creativity and destructiveness of a politically intended globalization, the relation between politics and society as such is up for discussion' (Habermas, 2012: 55).

The crisis of politics suggested by the 2018 Italian elections fires the crisis of a society no longer able to interpret – in a coherent way – the unfathomable complexity of our world, as marked by the 'decline of individualism' and the 'fall of the public man' (Sennett, 1977). The spiral framework of our social environments is impeded by our blindness in the presence of the institutional fallout of national governments, insofar as they are swamped by the lure of balance and stability. Thus, the media discourse on European unification risks emphasizing the tensions and quarrels rather than nurturing any intensive efforts to find a possible alternative to austerity.

In this perspective, the analysis of the public sphere suggested by Habermas in 2008 may still be interesting, especially if we focus on the inputs and outputs shaping published public opinions. This is what Habermas pointed out in 2011 about the 'virtual environment' of the European Union: 'The European institutions have long since staked out for the enfranchised EU citizens, with their wine-red passports, the virtual space which would have to be filled with life by appropriately extended communication processes within civil society' (Habermas, 2012: 48).

Despite the difficulties lurking in such a renovation effort, the unification process risks bolstering the fracture between national and supra-national communities, enhancing the fluctuating complexity of collective representations. Nonetheless, identity is no longer a unifying feature concerning value and symbolic sharing. Social identity is increasingly built by the frenzied exchanges of information supported by our hyper-connected condition. This is what Shaun Moores highlights in reference to the radicalization of media influence: 'it is necessary to appreciate the complex ways in which media of communication are bound up with wider institutional, technological and political processes in the modern world, from the reproduction of social life on an everyday basis to the reorganization of social relation on a global scale' (Moores, 2005: 3).

According to Habermas, our public sphere fires the use of media and the cult of communication, as we constantly realize through our mobile device dependence. These interactional shifts have relevant influence on the diffusion

of the so called ‘published public opinions’, especially from a political perspective. Political elections are no longer ordinary commitments: the recent electoral results in Italy mean the profound will of renovation affecting people worn out by the lack of any exit strategy from stasis and disappointed expectations.

However, the media help us understand the meaning of new political rhetoric imbued with the mirage of full democracy and the dream of solidarity. Media and politics should build a different narration of our post-modern condition (Latour, 1991), in compliance with the diffused need for transparency and accountability: ‘Be that as it may, the political parties would have to remember that democratic elections are not opinion polls, but the result of a process of forming a public will in which arguments carry weight’ (Habermas 2015: 21).

Hence follows the importance of the so called ‘quality press’, which ought to trigger cultural debate and exchange about the most important topics, political, economic and social. The inputs and outputs of the public sphere stem from the cross-media flows permeating social communities. In this account, communicative policies of the European Union are weakened by recurring crisis and unsolved problems (Parito, 2019). The political blindness of such a fluctuating scenario is determining a worrying mistrust in both national and supra-national institutions, inevitably fueled by the quarrels between the representatives of the European Union and national rulers, as is happening in Italy. Surely this is not the right moral perspective to pursue in the name of loyalty and solidarity:

According to Habermas, the moral perspective has priority over the ethical perspective. The moral trumps the ethical if there is a clash between the two as in the example of torture. This is so because we may come to an understanding of who we are and what we value, but there is then an additional question we must address given that we live in a pluralist world (Thomassen, 2010: 96).

This alleged pluralist world cannot set aside the countless symbols, signs, contents, topics, issues and information circulating in the public sphere. The latter ought to be viewed as an ever changing space for debate taking form on digital platforms. This is what some political parties have rightly understood, as the fast rise of the Five Star Movement and the Lega (the Northern League) in Italy shows. The control of mainstream and social media is indeed the real trademark of successful political communication strategy, especially in the presence of populist and anti-European announcements. The antidemocratic resurgences set a disquieting undertone, threatening our unstable certainties.

This is why anti-European rhetoric dwells on the failure of national governments in pursuing an effective debt control policy, which is often hampered by personal interests and internal opposition.

Hence follows the condition of uncertainty already emphasized by Bauman in reference to the individualization process of our existence: 'Anxiety and audacity, fear and courage, despair and hope are born together. But the proportion in which they are mixed depends on the resources in one's possession' (Bauman, 2001: 142). The anti-European feelings stem from identity drawbacks lurking in globalization. The latter is expected to overlap nationalisms, localisms, self-reference.

Furthermore, economic austerity has paradoxically fueled new forms of populisms, so embedded in the conviction that being part of a wider community might undermine internal balance. That is why Habermas recently had recourse to the TINA slogan (*There is no alternative*), which was deceitfully suggested by Angela Merkel as a threatening rule.

But European economic policies should pay more attention to local identities and historical backgrounds, as Habermas points out about the South of Italy. In chapter four of *The Lure of Technocracy*, entitled *Democracy or capitalism?*, he deals with some issues against a political union. Thus he develops some insights by Wolfgang Streeck starting from the former DDR soon after the reunification (Habermas, 2015).

In the case of Italy, the separation between South and North is a fundamental social and economic aspect that still permeates the way of life and cultural patterns. The issue of unification fires the lack of real national cohesion, both economic and linguistic, as the endless dialects heard in our country demonstrate. Habermas highlights the Italian unification just to remind us how complex and harsh any attempt to build a common identity can be, especially when such attempts are related to political and economic policies. Therefore he deals with the 'historic roots' of the current situation, legacy of the incompleteness of our 'Risorgimento' (Habermas, 2015: 96).

Local and national interests jeopardized an effective policy of development, which appears to be undermined by political short-sightedness and economic clumsiness. Therefore, corruption turned into a dead weight hampering the necessary innovation policies. A recently unified country needed to build its own national identity. And this is what Italy should trigger to approve the construction of a fully unified Europe, requiring cohesion more than quarrels and separation threats. Yet corruption and political instability keep on being detrimental to our international image. Let us focus on our condition soon after the unification:

The political implementation of the development programmes was thwarted by a corruption-prone administration and not by the resistance of a social and economic culture that drew its strength from a form of life worthy of preservation. In the context of the legally highly codified European multilevel system, however, the rocky administrative road from Rome to Calabria and Sicily is not a credible model for the national implementation of programmes originating in Brussels, in whose realization sixteen other wary nations would be involved (Habermas, 2015: 96).

The profound differences between South and North Italy confirm Habermas's assertion. Indeed, he ponders about the historical dimension of our geographical unification, still expecting to become fully cultural, linguistic and economic. The substantial rifts between the Northern and Southern regions should inspire a different concept of social solidarity, aiming to overcome the impromptu initiatives of economic assistance, as the 'income of citizenship' can be considered nowadays.

However, the current political situation does not allow us to inherit the model of our 'Risorgimento' in such a way as to fuel a new social deal, requiring a more complex and continuous political effort, both national and European. The 'Italian crisis' appears to be the physiological implosion of a country still looking for its territorial and political identity, unfortunately undermined by violence, corruption, populisms, obsolescence.

Thus, the myth of the North as the most productive and efficient area of Italy is continuously fostered by the 'Lega' party which feeds off a right-wing populism founded on anti-migrant prejudice and fears of modernization rampant in the middle class. Habermas's hint at the rise of populisms (in the speech delivered in July 2018 in Berlin) echo some of his reflections developed in *The Lure of Technocracy*, which is focused on the profound contrasts stemming from forcible unifications (Habermas, 2015).

Separatism leads to isolationism, since the lack of dialogue, sooner or later, may engender the culture of suspicion. The rhetoric of separatism inspiring the political action of the Italian Lega Nord finally meant the claim of more social solidarity and economic protection, in contrast with the indications of the European Union. Its populist rhetoric, mainly focused on the supremacy of the North and the protection of national boundaries from illegal immigration, brought it a real electoral triumph.

The transformation of the Lega Nord into a government force means that national claims and anti-European discourses can penetrate into the public opinion, through the smart use of media and social media. The fear of losing identity is likely to be stronger than the need to attain mobility and international cohesion: 'a politically enforced assimilation of the economic

cultures of the South to those of the North would also mean a levelling of the corresponding forms of life' (Habermas, 2015: 97).

Assimilation of existential perspectives conceals potential risks of hetero-direction, as Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out while World War II was wiping out any chance of dialogue among different cultures and interests. Once again, solidarity and loyalty appear as utopian goals, increasingly fading in the presence of the individualized society (Bauman, 2001). To the fore is the real influence of political power, about to foster the rise of new and old populisms. The latter are more and more inspired by media discourses on the incumbent dangers stemming from the decline of national identities (Ampola, Corchia, 2007; Müller, 2017).

Media power has a relevant role in the construction of such Euro skepticism, fueled by the increasing distrust in supra-national apparatus. This is what Habermas highlighted in 2008, thus disclosing some issues then retrieved in *The Lure of Technocracy*: 'The print and electronic media draw their politically relevant material from both inside and outside the media system. Television is now the primary source of political news in western societies, and this popular medium is more widely disseminated than the so-called prestige media' (Habermas, 2009: 169).

The influence of television in the global media scenario fires the constant presence of social media in our daily interactions, thus producing a cross-media narration of our complexity (Baraldi, 2012). The rhetoric of anti-European propaganda is exploited by media to diffuse the sense of uncertainty affecting our connected civilizations, based on the religion of risk. Quality press and opinions appear to be one possible exit to such a semantic confusion, destined to pervade the collective discourses about nationalisms, populisms and economic austerity (Marini, 2004).

5. Conclusion. Good Europeans and quality information

Are we still good Europeans? As we mentioned before, this question seems to inspire Habermas's recent works about the destiny of the European Union dealing with the drawbacks produced by a complex unification process. The rise of right-wing populisms implies a thorough reflection upon the construction of a real European citizenship, free of the present anti-migration discourses and not encumbered by the specter of economic austerity. Media may play a decisive role in stimulating a different approach to the main European issues framed within the wider scenario of common loyalty and solidarity (Piras, 2016; Belluati 2015).

Habermas's speech delivered at the award of the German-French journalism prize revolves around the counter-circuit between national identity and supra-national communities, destined to interact – as much as possible – according to the rules suggested by economic sustainability. The recent quarrels between the Italian government and the European authorities confirm Habermas's doubts about German stubbornness in pursuing policies of austerity, unavoidably destined to increase the distance between North and South.

Fragmentation involves not only Europe, but the whole globalized world, undermined by the risks engendered by religious, economic, cultural, linguistic, geographical and political conflicts (Ceppa, 2017; Cunico, 2009). From this point of view, Habermas's speech is an effective sample of quality press, inspired by a sharp sense of realism. The decay of traditional structures of power matches the rise of new institutional stakeholders, who are fully submerged into media communities.

The fall and resurrection of political élites is closely related to the power of influencing public opinion that is deeply embedded in the symbolic fluctuations of digital environments (Gleick, 2012). This is what is going on in Italy: the last political elections featured the contraposition between old and new power élites. The anti-system rhetoric involves European governance as well, since the latter appears to have underestimated the negative consequences of economic austerity.

The faltering project of Europe needs a new plea for European solidarity, founded on the intensive circulation of 'reflected public opinions' capable of persuading European citizens about the need of cooperation and inclusion. Transparency and correctness should inspire any efforts of 'opinion-forming élites', by means of the selection and diffusion of quality contents, analysis, comments (Habermas, 2009: 165).

This is what Habermas wrote in 2006, when he realized that communicative complexity stems from the overlapping of countless public opinions, both mainstream and digital. Twelve years later, the awarding of the German-French Journalism Prize allowed him to update his vision of the European project, focusing on the role played by France and Germany in the international scenario, also in reference to the 'Italian crisis'.

His speech can be read as a meaningful sample of quality press, perfectly framed into his recent reflection about the crisis of the European Union: 'Today, national populations are overwhelmed by the politically uncontrollable functional imperatives of a global capitalism that is being driven by unregulated financial markets. The frightened retreat behind

national borders cannot be the correct response to that challenge' (Habermas, 2018).

When a polymath thinker like Habermas wonders whether we are still good Europeans, rulers should reflect about the effects of our globalization, affecting the metamorphosis of our world (Beck, 2016). The demolition of traditional national boundaries should inspire a sense of disorientation amplified by media, constantly striving to emphasize the functional shifts of our existential environments. To the fore is the 'new ecology' of European communicative space which has been recently probed by Belluati and Marini (2019). The goal of European citizenship may be achieved through the practice of cultural inclusion, inspiring any good European willing to share good thinking and quality communication (Privitera, 2001; Giovagnoli, 2000).

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