2020-1950: RETROSPECTION OR INTROSPECTION?

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Our countries are currently engaged in a fight that they will win in the strict sense of health care, however, in a longer timeframe and amidst greater uncertainties than originally thought. This crisis is likely to leave behind lasting traces at economic, social, and political levels. In particular, it is the illusion of returning to the national framework that threatens us. Certain traits of the current political discourse, even the most elaborated ones, and the recurrent attitude of some countries towards European solidarity may strengthen our faith in solutions based on turning in upon ourselves. Therefore, the circumstances urge us to return to the basics and reflect on the meaning of the European plan suggested by Robert Schuman in 1950. Especially because we like comparing the Covid-19 crisis to a wartime experience.

In 1950, the Schuman Declaration was written by Jean Monnet and his collaborators who were greatly influenced by the experiences of the wars between 1914 and 1918, and 1939 and 1945. During World War I, the French and British allies very quickly faced the limits of their national capacity in the fields of industrial production, raw material acquisition, food supply, technology, transport, and financial resources. In these grave circumstances, they were better able to call into question their national institutional structures and decisions taken on a national basis than today, and they were more willing to share all the resources regardless of nationality, and direct them where common needs arose. All this was done through a management method that brought about a revolution by itself in the principles of governance. The inventors and the implementers of this tremendous undertaking were Jean Monnet in France and Sir Arthur Salter in Great Britain. In 1939, upon the outbreak of World War II, the French and the British established common structures with the same objectives. This management method, which Monnet and others also adapted to transatlantic relations, did not cease to exist with the French defeat of 1940. The lend-lease programme and the Marshall Plan were also partly due to this.

Just like others, Monnet supporting the establishment of the French Plan Commission in 1946 considered that the reconstruction of France was only possible within a framework responding to primarily national objectives, even if it could have been accompanied by American support and certain forms of cooperation between the European allies. However, this illusion faded quickly and the confrontation with the major external threat at the beginning of the Cold War resulted in returning to the logic of the merger of resources and management on the basis of the experiences gained during the two wars.

In May 1950 the Schuman Declaration reintroduced the methods and principles formed during the war in a Western European scale plan. The
developers of the plan assumed that the reconstruction without Germany was impossible and it could even result in the states concerned losing their independence. Monnet and the Europeans also concluded that collective solutions based on purely national logic, that are necessarily based on decisions considering temporary and partial interests, led to failure. This had been the case during the interwar period, when not even the formation of a vivid European unity aspiration had been enough to create the basic pillars of a European organisation based on new foundations. In 1950 Monnet and his collaborators decided that it was time to break the ice. By this time there were more Europeans who wanted to lay the foundations of a closer cooperation than back in 1920. Nevertheless, there was the question of method. Solidarity is the basis of everything, but factual solidarity was needed. Only a few years have passed since the war, thus no mention had to be made of the friendship of peoples in order to draw such conclusions. The pooling of instruments necessary for sustainable economic reconstruction should not be put in question, even if in the meantime we return to a “normal” or a better situation. The period after the two World Wars had proved this. For two reasons: on the one hand, prosperity cannot be definitively guaranteed; on the other hand, economic instruments available to states may serve the interests of the moment, but, worse than that, the logic of confrontation as well. Therefore, solidarity must be sustained by an institutional organisation that makes joint governance and subsequent political construction possible.

The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) established by the Schuman Plan is, however, a dual process. On the one hand, it aims to decentralise economic tools through the market. Resource sharing shall not be a kind of administered exchange process organised at state level, but shall rather aim the creation of an integrated market, where the interaction of actors and companies reshapes the economic structure. All this at such a level that through the successive unification of coal extraction or steel production not German, French, Belgian, Italian, Dutch or Luxembourgian, but European companies are established. On the other hand, it should be possible for the authorities to regain control in case of imminent circumstances. Not at national, but at European level. In the event of an obvious crisis, this hypothesis has been taken into account in the context of the ECSC.

What have we done since? A lot, but we have often lost sight of what is essential, as demonstrated by the nature of European discussions arisen in connection with the management of the Covid-19 crisis. Many things happened since the creation of the Common Market: the construction of the internal market, the realisation of the monetary union, and the introduction of common policies in several areas. Several of these tools continued to develop, in particular following the 2008 crisis, due to which the European Central Bank’s (ECB) capacity to assume political responsibility in times of crisis has been
significantly increased. The decisions that the ECB was able to take last March, when it launched a massive asset purchase programme intended to support the public finances of European States, demonstrate the need for the link between political decision-making capacity, and institutional instruments.

The question of solidarity also arises today regarding the management of the costs caused by the crisis. Solidarity cannot be ignored from the point of view of security and the conditions for the restoration of the economy, and in connection with conclusions to be drawn (such as those regarding health security, raw material and food supply, scientific and industrial capacities). Discourses calling into question globalisation, behind of which the logic of national introversion is lying, do not respond in any way to the problems of the moment, and can only deceive our fellow citizens through the appearances of solutions.

Nevertheless, the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that a more regulated globalisation that takes into consideration European interests as well was essential. However, interdependence will subsist at a global level, and European States taken in isolation are unable to negotiate the necessary regulations. The same applies to several other objectives: strategic stocks linked to a whole range of risks, the capacity to meet future challenges that could not be identified to date. A European response is essential as a source of considerable international capacity, efficiency and economy, the joint management of which is much more effective than the mere addition of the most relevant national efforts.

The relaunch of European economy will only be effective if it is conducted in a coordinated manner, not by the disorder inherent in the national approaches. Here again, the context of Schuman Plan tells us a lot. The risk is that in the absence of proper cooperation, the partial relaunch of activities may run out of steam. The cooperation realised by OEEC (the predecessor of OECD) at a European level, and the success that it has achieved in the 1950s shows the way forward. Beyond that, the recovery of the economy shall be put on a basis ensuring priority to future investments. To be effective and politically credible, investments must be abundant. The financial resources of states who will be more heavily indebted after the crisis will not be enough. Once again, the lessons learned from the Schuman Declaration and European experience come into play. The community method consists of pooling instruments and policies considered to be of basic strategic importance. Under such circumstances, costs must be shared. The reluctance of governments is, of course, understandable; they do not want to assume the burden of past debts of several other states considered to have been poorly managed, however, the efforts to be made for the future are of such magnitude that the pooling of debts has become necessary. Implementing this makes it possible for us to
involve everyone in the efforts to be made. We will have the results in terms of security, efficiency and cohesion and the savings made possible by such an approach that is properly managed at European level. The community method that consists of leaving the responsibility of managing their own affairs in the hands of states and uniting efforts towards a common future is the best method until we are not afraid to give it the right dimensions. Such an approach is needed more than ever before. In the history of the 20th century there were governments who tried to escape the challenges of the moment with the strategy of national withdrawal. World War II swept them away. Today Europe cannot count on any external assistance to face the challenges of the moment. Therefore, it is time to draw the conclusions from the experience of the 1950s.

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