

6 Most liberals say ‘yes’ to Europe, supporting further European integration and enlargement. Are larger states (read: the EU) to be preferred over nation states from a liberal perspective?

By Rutger Claassen

What to think of Europe? as a liberal

What to think of Europe? I approach the question from the perspective of the political philosophy of liberalism, an intellectual tradition shaped by giants such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and further moulded after the Second World War by Isaiah Berlin, Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls and many others. It is a tradition that is not restricted to the self-identified liberal parties in Dutch politics (such as VVD or D66) – most parties from left to right subscribe to large parts of this liberal heritage.

The fundamental yardstick of the liberal political philosophy is the ideal of equal freedom and the idea that states and governments exist to defend and promote each individual’s opportunities to live a free, self-determining, autonomous life. In contrast to theocratic, autocratic and despotic regimes, liberal states are there for their citizens, not the other way around. This is ensured through four core institutions. First, the rule of law: lib-

eral states protect fundamental constitutional rights (freedom of religion, association, speech, non-discrimination, etc.). Every government intervention is based on law. Second, democracy: in liberal states, the people rule through a system in which every citizen is free to participate by voting and running for office. Third, a market economy: this leaves citizens free to produce, trade and consume goods as they want. Fourth, a welfare state: this protects citizens’ capacities for autonomous living when they are unable to do so themselves, through the delivery of vital public goods such as social security, education and health care. These four institutions make up the package of ‘liberal goods’, as I will call them.

While liberalism has given us this clear picture of how a political community should be organised, it is much less clear how large this community should ideally be. In principle, liberal communities could be organised at a very small

scale (a world without states but only municipalities) or a very large scale (only one community: a world state), or anything in between. In the current situation, in which European citizens have to choose between their familiar nation-states or further European integration, liberalism only provides us with the following guideline: ‘we should accept the replacement of the nation-state by the EU to the extent that this is the best way to guarantee being to live in a liberal political community’. Thus, in the near future liberals should look to the respective abilities of nation-states and the EU to deliver the four core liberal goods I mentioned above. This is a *comparative* question: we are not searching for the perfect system, but for that level of community (the national, the European, or any other), which performs the best in comparison to the other options. This is also a *dynamic* question, as we have to think about which level will do the best not only today and tomorrow, but also in the more distant future.

So, which one does the best? In the history of liberalism we can find inspiration for three very different answers. The first answer is the *cosmopolitan* theory, described by Immanuel Kant in his famous tract *Perpetual Peace* (Kant 1996 [1795]). Kant first argues that it would be best if states were organised internally as republics in which the freedom and equality of citizens was upheld (this is his liberalism). He then argues that it would be best if republican states were merged into a world republic. This is the only arrangement, he thinks, that will put all wars to rest and give the world perpetual peace since as long as states remain independent, the international sphere will continue to look like a ‘state of nature’, in which there is no supreme authority and in which war between the states can break out at any time. He contrasts that with a world republic in which states subject themselves to a higher legal authority, and the state of nature is replaced by a civil state ruled by law rather than force (as is now the case only domestically). We can easily recognise Kant’s overriding concern with peace in international relations when we look at the foundation of both the UN and the EU. The purpose of making future wars between the

major powers on the European continent impossible was, after all, the driving motivation behind the European project.

There are two reasons, however, why the Kantian cosmopolitan theory cannot guide us today. First, peace cannot be our only concern. As argued above, the package of liberal goods has to guide us in choosing whether or not (or to what extent) to merge our European nations into a single ‘European republic’. The concern with peace is important, but cannot alone determine the desirability of political, social and economic integration – it may even be that NATO membership is sufficient to keep the peace. Second, as Kant himself recognised, states do not want a world republic. This wish should be accepted, Kant thought, since it is itself the expression of the popular will of the peoples involved (Kleingeld 2004). Therefore, even though he thought it *best* for the prospect of perpetual peace if all states joined a world republic, he also argued that they should not be forced to do so. In practice, they should then settle for a looser ‘league of nations’ in which they retain their independence. Thus, the cosmopolitan argument for world peace does not force us in the direction of larger states and we have to decide for ourselves whether we want to make this step, basing our answer on the full package of liberal goods.

A second, opposing, answer to the European question can be found in the tradition of *liberal nationalism*, which argues that from a liberal perspective we are best off in nation states. John Stuart Mill provides a striking example when he writes:

“Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.” (Mill 1991 [1861], 428).

This thought is also at the basis of other, more contemporary theories of liberal nationalism (Miller 1995), which argue that only in nation-states bound by a common language, history

‘The more contemporary theories of liberal nationalism argue that only in nation-states bound by a common language, history and culture do we find the level of solidarity that lies at the basis of citizens, loyalty to a state’

and culture do we find the level of solidarity that lies at the basis of citizens’ loyalty to a state. They argue further that without such loyalty the general respect for the law, willingness to pay taxes and to serve in the army, etc. would not exist. Liberalism is not antithetical to community, in this tradition, but it needs a community with boundaries as a social-psychological basis that allows its citizens to support the workings of a liberal state (for further discussion, see Claassen 2011, 258ff.).

The problem with liberal nationalism is that it is unclear whether or not it can be transposed to a higher level. Amongst contemporary liberals, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in particular has made it clear that we might be able to get the necessary loyalty from citizens on a thinner basis than a fully shared culture, namely by way of their adherence to a common constitutional project (he calls this ‘constitutional patriotism’). Even when they differ in background, ethnicity, language and culture, citizens can successfully form one state if they subscribe to the same basic constitutional values (essentially, those of liberalism!). He originally defended this thought to provide a basis for the German

Republic after the war, when a strong ethnic-cultural definition of German-ness was taboo. Now he transplants it to the European level so as to explain how different European peoples can form one Union (Habermas 2012). Others have questioned whether this can be enough: they insist that a European democracy needs a European ‘demos’ and that no such common identity is available. The jury is still out on this question.

A third possible answer in liberal philosophy is a *pragmatic* one. Instead of strongly connecting the liberal ideal of equal freedom to a world republic (cosmopolitanism) or to a nation state (liberal nationalism), the best scale of a liberal political community might depend on the socio-historical circumstances. Following this line of thought, we move our democracy to the level at which it is best able to provide the other liberal goods, most notably the market economy and the welfare state. Habermas’ position is an example of this. He does not think that we need European integration because we will have a *better* democracy at this level than we have now in the nation states. Indeed, he sees all too clearly the difficulties of establishing a European democracy that functions as well as national democracies do. No, his real reason is that *given* the forces of globalisation, European integration is the only way to protect our welfare states and face the global challenges and risks that have emerged (global environmental pollution and climate change, terrorism, migration, the pressures of global financial markets). He sees no alternative.

Thus, in order to determine the best scale for our community, we need to consider the balance to be struck between the market economy and the welfare state. The latter institution is an indispensable part of liberal philosophy, although some European right-wing liberal parties sometimes think this is rather a socialist concern and the exact place of the welfare state in liberal thought is controversial. There is a familiar split in liberal thought between *classical liberalism* (right-wing liberalism), which puts more emphasis on the free market, and *egalitarian liberalism* (social liberalism), which sees a larger role for the

state in helping citizens through redistribution and public goods. The classical wing has historically had an important role in Europe: the EU’s internal market for goods, services, capital and persons has been the heart of the European integration process since the Second World War. This has had conflicting effects. While it has increased prosperity for all Europeans, it has also put major pressures on the welfare state. It is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold a welfare state nationally, but due to differences in political cultures and levels of economic advancement, it is also very difficult to have a welfare state on a European level.

This difficulty means that how one thinks of this balance between the market and the welfare state will determine how one judges the desirability of European integration. Habermas, as we saw, thinks that Europeanisation is inevitable in times of globalisation. But other liberals are not so sure. As the late John Rawls argued:

“The large open market including all of Europe is the aim of the large banks and the capitalist business class whose main goal is simply larger profit. The idea of economic growth, onwards and upwards, with no specific end in sight, fits this class perfectly. If they speak about distribution, it is [al]most always in terms of trickle down. The long-term result of this – which we already have in the United States – is a civil society awash in a meaningless consumerism of some kind. I can’t believe that that is what you want” (Rawls and Van Parijs 2003).

Here we see how Rawls starts from a rejection of economic growth as a liberal ideal in itself. More economic welfare is not always freedom enhancing; especially if one takes the freedom of future generations into account (Claassen 2011, 150–155, 211–218). This leads Rawls to a very different appreciation of the desirability of European integration. Contrary to Habermas, he believes there are always alternatives and choosing between competing conceptions of the future is the nature of (democratic) politics.

There is much work to be done for liberals. Unfortunately Habermas never explains how

the European Union could incorporate the ‘social dimension’. Equally unfortunately Rawls never sketches how a society which says farewell to economic growth can function well. An animated political debate between these (and other) radically different interpretations of the basic liberal idea of equal freedom is what Europe needs, but now avoids – this is true for politicians as much as for philosophers.

‘A pragmatic view states that the best scale of a liberal political community might depend on the socio-historical circumstances’

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