

Seeking Europe? After the crisis? Seeking orientation in our constitution for our policies and actions

Johannes Priesemann, President of IPSO, International and European Public Services Organisation¹, in the context of the Seminar: “Seeking Europe after the crisis of the financial and banking systems”

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That I speak to you goes back to a visit of unionists led by Daniele Quiriconi to my union at the European Central Bank, to IPSO. We have had a frank exchange of views. An invitation to this conference followed. I therefore thank Daniele and the organisers for this opportunity to share my views on the topic of this conference. I was told that I can say what I want. I appreciate this freedom. It reminds me of the question of a child in the former German Democratic Republic, the GDR, that was unsure what to say in public where there was a potential for problems with “the authorities”. The child said: “Shall I say what is right or shall I say what I think?” My problem is even bigger and I consider this to be a virtue: I am not sure whether it is right what I think. I expose it nevertheless and my children remind me that it has a meaning that people have two ears and only one mouth. I can then hear what others think about my thoughts with my left and with my right ear. And saying this I think I share already two points of orientation in the debate of our seminar. Two points traditionally associated with Europe: **universal scepticism and open dialogue.**

I question the title of this conference and at the same time appreciating it.

First: Should we be seeking Europe?

I question this and I also agree with this. I question this as a German modifying what was said by Goethe and Schiller to the Germans at a different time and in a different context: don't aim to build a nation, Europeans, become humans in the best sense of that word – you can do so and this will be freer.² This is why I question whether we should seek Europe. We should seek with all our capacities the conditions for a society that allows humans to thrive. How? There is debate and fight around this. What we call “Europe” provides an answer with which I fully agree. Article 2 TEU:

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

I also agree with the aims of the European Union:

¹ Views expressed are those of the author.

² Xenien: Zur Nation euch zu bilden, ihr hoffet es, Deutsche, vergebens; bildet, ihr könnt es, dafür freier zu Menschen euch aus.

“The Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.” It gets, however difficult when we read on: “The Union shall offer its citizens an area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers, in which the free movement of persons is ensured in conjunction with appropriate measures with respect to external border controls, asylum, immigration and the prevention and combating of crime.”

We have free movement within the Union. At the borders of Europe people die trying to seek asylum. People also die outside the borders because they do not live in peace and prosperity.

So, my first conclusion is: we should seek within the sphere of our influence an order that lives up to our values. These values should make sense to our brains and hearts. Achieving and keeping this order is a permanent struggle and challenge. We observe disorder within and around our sphere of influence “Europe”. To regain or gain order our values should guide us. And agreeing with Goethe and Schiller I think it will turn out to be helpful if these are universally human and not nationalistic, if these are human and not only European. In my view the European values go in this direction and we should measure and judge our policies and actions in light of these values.

After the crisis?

I also question whether we are “dopo la crisi del Sistema finanziario e bancario”. I do not know whether the title of this conference means: now, that we are after the crisis of the financial and banking system let us seek Europe again or whether it shall say let us seek Europe to overcome the financial and banking crisis. As I said: I like the title because it inspires these questions. I think that we are in a sense “out of the woods.” But I ask whether we are “*after the financial and banking crisis*”. Crisis, in the medical sense and if I am not mistaken in its deepest meaning means turning point. Yes, we have a turning point – things go better. Have we seen a “critical turning point”?

Here I really get “critical” in my thinking and would like to share these thoughts. I would like to do this step by step from my understanding what I expect a trade union or union to deliver, inspired by the quest for Europe, i.e. a political community of free, uncensored debate. I think that a trade union must be a place where the employees think and debate about the work, the working conditions and the meaning of the work, the quality of the products systematically and in solidarity. When I say systematically, I do mean that a responsible trade union work should look at the impact of the product on all members of society and for future generations. The question must be: does our work contribute to life on this planet? Does our work make this planet better? This is the responsible view on the collective of life here of which we are an integrated, depending and acting part. When I say in solidarity the point is about fairness for all. Solidarity is about sharing and cooperating, helping, caring for each other. A trade union can in my view not be reduced to the representation of material interests, or, even narrower, of the financial interests of a particular group, not caring for all others.

What does that mean concretely for the work of my union, the one which represents members of staff at the European Central Bank, the ECB? There is one area where I think that the ECB is not European. All labour law or civil service law or law is unilaterally set by the ECB’s Governing Council. This is decided without public debate behind closed doors and in the absence of staff

representatives, media or public scrutiny. It is my belief that this law currently caters adequately for the financial interests of staff – yet not of all staff and not equally. But this law does not cater for a systematic and meaningful social dialogue. Neither at the ECB level nor at the level of the Eurosystem. Seeking Europe means for me: making the ECB democratic internally and having a democratic debate on the conditions and procedures for us as independent guardians of the monetary order, promoters of the financial infrastructure and supervisors of the European banking system. How can Europe afford and tolerate that those who are the owners and employers also set unilaterally the conditions for their staff? Does nobody see there a risk? I do see number of risks: of undue influence, of unfair and non-transparent procedures, of abuse of rules, arbitrariness, favouritism and a weak internal debate on the meaning and content of our work. This is, I confess, uncomfortable and hard to say.

Moreover, I see another risk and this applies to European and international organisations in general and not only to the ECB. The positions in these organisations are attractive but not really well protected when it comes to judicial control. I only refer in this context to the lasting scandalous situation in the European Patent Office – which is a stark outlier in this. In milder form we also see ample room for improvement. I personally deplore the costly, long winded and ineffective judicial control by the European Court of Justice or other tribunals. Seeking Europe after the crisis: fast, cheap and effective judicial control for all EU civil servants and workers and likewise for all international organisations! Current procedures are costly, limited, and take long time. I consider this to be 19th century: suffer the injury and liquidate your damage (if you dare and can). This is not the Europe I dream of.

I leave now aside the use of temporary agency work by the ECB for permanent tasks over many years. I leave aside that in my view Germany has not been taken to order by the EU Commission for its implementation of the EU temporary agency work Directive. My union fights against this and we are appalled that the ECB now aims to honour decade-long service of agency workers by outsourcing these jobs.

More generally a union must be a place where systematic thinking and thinking under the aspect of solidarity has to take place about the meaning of the work. IPSO does this by a seminar series open to all members and all staff: IPSOnomics. This is a good thing. It is in this context where we discuss alternatives to existing policies, analyses of the socio-economic situation, look at the impact of our financial and banking system on the system of life on this planet. We have had Thomas Piketty showing that the problem of uneven income and wealth distribution aggravates. We had speakers advocating a sustainable economy, thought about the job guarantee and sovereign money. Antoine Vauchez shared his ideas how to democratise Europe. The references and speeches were all made public on our website: <http://www.ipso.de/bootstrap.php#activities>. My conclusion is: TAAMAA, not TINA: There are always many alternatives – there is not no alternative. Yet, there is little good alternative, if at all, to open, frank discussion without presuppositions.

Let me summarise: I started by quoting the little girl from the GDR: shall I say what is right or shall I say what I think? She has got it right with her alternative. In essence I think that Simone Weil was pointing in the right direction with her thought that it is necessary to abolish all political parties.



Parties, groups, collectives do not think. It is always individuals who think. Responsibility means that the individual has to think and feel about the collective. At the same time a caring collective has to reflect and respect the individual's rights. Seeking Europe after the financial and banking crisis means for me an endless, a tireless debate about a human order for this planet and all beings where everyone can and should express her thoughts, his feelings and his or her intentions. This is where we have to work on: honesty, openness on personal interests, disclosing conflicts of interests, denouncing corruption, favouritism and power structures following particular interests. Our values are there. They give us direction and are the benchmark in the discussions. The virtues in this debate I consider needed are patience, stamina and honesty. And there should be joy. The joy in the encounter and debate and also the joy to discover: I made an error. What I thought is not right. What I felt is too mean. What I did was wrong – thank you that you forgive me. Who said this was easy? It will take time. We are in the middle of the crisis. Let us reflect, debate and act. Try and fail better next time. TAAMAA: always many alternatives. Thank you. Thank you very much!