

Johan van der Walt

What Germany Really Owes Greece

Reflections on Mauss, Mandela and Merkel and a Reply to
Bofinger, Habermas and Nida-Rümelin

The article “Einspruch gegen die Fassaden-demokratie”¹ by Peter Bofinger, Jürgen Habermas and Julian Nida-Rümelin evinces clear continuity with the critique of European politics that Habermas has frequently articulated in recent writings. According to Habermas, European politics is stuck in a mindless incrementalism (*kopfloser Inkrementalismus*²) that only serves to worsen the political-economic crisis in Europe. At issue is, for Habermas, the technocratic tinkering (through saving mechanisms and packages) with which European and especially German politicians have been trying to solve the financial crisis in Europe without addressing the political crisis that underlies the financial crisis. Habermas has been advocating, and does so again here with Nida-Rümelin and Bofinger, a bolder move towards European political integration. Habermas uses even stronger language elsewhere: “Schluss mit der Feigheit der Politiker” is his battle call in another recent intervention.³

The Social Democrats in Germany have solicited and have responded favourably to the Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin intervention. One can only welcome the signs of a new political courage and creativity that seeks to break out of the desperate impasse in which Europe finds itself currently and one can only hope that this new vision may soon gain more momentum, also outside SPD circles. In this regard one can also commend Habermas for

recently putting his finger on one of the major obstacles in the way of this new politics, namely, Angela Merkel’s vacillation between European statesmanship on the one hand, and party political leadership, on the other.⁴ Merkel’s questionable leadership has also been observed by others in recent months. Especially noteworthy in this regard was Eugenio Scalfari’s damning account of the way Merkel’s party political concerns prevents her from rising to the statesmanship that might lead Europe out of the current crisis. Should the idea of European economic and political integration eventually come to fail as a result of the current crisis, argued Scalfari, Merkel’s politics will be remembered as yet another of Germany’s major historical failures to reconcile national interests with broader European concerns.⁵

It is illuminating to compare Merkel’s political hesitance with the epochal act of statesmanship and political courage with which Nelson Mandela almost unilaterally broke the surely not less dramatic political impasse that held South Africa captive during the last years of the apartheid regime. Mandela and the ANC leadership had already been transferred from Robben Island to the Pollsmoor prison in Cape Town when he was referred to the Volks Hospital for surgery in 1985. The transfer to Pollsmoor was clearly understood as a move of the government to isolate the core leadership of the ANC from the rest of the

ANC members incarcerated on Robben Island. After his surgery Mandela was further informed that he would henceforth also be isolated from the other ANC leaders in the Pollsmoor prison. A key passage from his autobiography tells the rest of the story in a nutshell: “The change, I decided, was not a liability but an opportunity. I was not happy to be separated from my colleagues [...] [b]ut my solitude gave me a certain liberty, and I resolved to use it to do something I had been pondering for a long while: begin discussions with the government ... This would be extremely sensitive. Both sides regarded discussions as a sign of weakness and betrayal. Neither would come to the table until the other made significant concessions.”⁶

Mandela could easily have alienated himself from the ANC leadership with this risky move. He could easily have sidelined himself, among his peers, as the comrade who had given up the struggle, the one who had become tired and just wanted to get out of prison while he still had some years to live. And the apartheid regime could easily have exploited his move by encouraging the interpretation that he had given up the struggle. They could easily have abused his initiative for the sake of some strategic advantage. Mandela nevertheless took this step with

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the clear conviction that he was doing the right thing. With this courageous step of selfless leadership and statesmanship he unilaterally precipitated the constitutional transition that brought apartheid to an end and founded the first constitutional democracy in South Africa.

With this unique act of political courage, Mandela bestowed on South Africa the gift of a new beginning. The distressing events that came to pass at the Marikana platinum mine near Pretoria recently suggest that Mandela's gift has been squandered by a subsequent generation of ANC politicians (one has become hesitant to call them "leaders"). These upsetting events should nevertheless not move one to lose faith in the power of magnanimous and creative political leadership that can rise above personal party political concerns. It is only this kind of leadership that is ultimately capable of ushering in significantly new political orders that break out of the frustrations and/or injustices of paralyzing pasts. It is this kind of leadership that Europe needs today and one can only hope that more politicians in Germany would wake up and rise to the Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin call for bolder political leadership in Europe. It would of course be very difficult for Merkel to respond positively to an intervention that has been solicited and endorsed by her major political opponents. She would surely have to face down or at least be willing to face down dramatic resistance within her own constituency. However, she has shown herself capable of leading her party instead of just being led and dictated by it with her remarkable turn on nuclear energy in 2011. The future of Europe may well turn on whether she is capable of a similar act of statesmanship in the context of European politics.

Should Merkel come to consider such an act of statesmanship, one may well hope that she would also transcend the one aspect of the Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin call that is deeply disconcerting, namely, their concern with Europe's world-historical role. Consider the dramatic parting shot with which they conclude their article: "Die europäischen Bevölkerungen müssen lernen, dass sie ihr sozialstaatliches Gesellschaftsmodell und die natio-



In October Angela Merkel visited Antónis Samarás, the prime minister of Greece (Hellenic Republic, CC BY-SA 2.0)

nalstaatliche Vielfalt ihrer Kulturen nur noch gemeinsam behaupten können. Sie müssen ihre Kräfte bündeln, wenn sie überhaupt noch auf die Agenda der Weltpolitik und die Lösung globaler Probleme Einfluss nehmen wollen. Der Verzicht auf die europäischen Einigung wäre auch ein Abschied von der Weltgeschichte." That political unification of Europe offers the only hope for those concerned with Europe's prominence in the age of globalisation has often been observed. An interview in the *Financial Times* with Jean-Claude Trichet at the time of his retirement from his position as president of the European Central Bank offered one of the most memorable examples in recent months. Trichet observed: "There are more reasons today for the Europeans to unite in economic, financial and monetary fields than there were at the beginnings of the 1950s, at the time of Robert Schuman [...] I really think that the transformation of the world [...] the emergence of China, India, of Latin America, calls for the Europeans to unite much more. One of the lessons of the crisis is precisely that they need more unity."⁷

The clear parallel between Trichet's observation and the one with which Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin conclude their

article underlines the questionable aspect of their remarkable and exciting intervention. The call for a bolder politics in this intervention would appear or can easily appear to be just another expression of the European elite's concern with global prominence and significance. The concern with Europe's world historical role that it articulates, risks, in fact, being associated with the idea of grand political subjectivity or *politische Großsubjektivität* that Habermas has often instructed us to dismiss.⁸ At issue here, however, is not only a problematic philosophical idea, the idea, namely, that a people or nation should present themselves in terms of an existential unity in the way an individual might present him- or herself as a unitary existential subject. Carl Schmitt's personifying conception of the political constitution of a people in terms of their concrete existential and psychological unity readily comes to mind in this regard.⁹ Again, at issue here is not only this dubious philosophical idea. At issue here is also the close relation between this philosophical idea and disastrous imperial designs that have bathed Europe repeatedly in blood. These imperial projects were indeed fashioned in the form and substance of *politische Großsubjektivität*. And it was these imperial subjectivities that sowed the seeds of distrust that

have undermined inter-European solidarity for longer than one can remember. It is against this background that it seems apposite to ask whether Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin's concern with the restoration of citizens democracy in a unitary Europe should begin with a contemplation of Europe's world historical role.

However unintended (as it most likely is), the idea may well be perceived as sufficiently related to the grand imperial designs of the past to sow seeds of distrust all over again, especially among the smaller and more vulnerable nations of Europe. The idea of Europe's world historical role is not likely to be high on the agenda of these nations, especially under circumstances where too many of their citizens are engaged in a desperate struggle for survival. World history is not the league in which these countries and these citizens see themselves playing. The idea of world historical relevance is most likely to be associated again with the grand designs of the stronger states of Europe. It is the competitiveness of these stronger European states with the United States, China, Latin-America and India (see again the statement of Trichet quoted above) that will appear to be at issue when Europe's world historical role becomes the motivation for the more incisive and decisive political integration of Europe for which the Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rüdelin intervention pleads. Might a certain instinct still lead Merkel to realise that there is something much more fundamental at stake in European integration than world historical sig-

nificance? Might it do so, in other words, in a similar way that a profound humanity moved Mandela to act on intuitions of care and compassion for the people of South Africa and earned him the stature of the father of a nation? One can learn from Mandela that *Großzügigkeit* precedes and preconditions any *Großsubjektivität* that one may or should ever hope for.

One can also learn much in this regard from one of Europe's greatest social theorists. Marcel Mauss' epochal *Essai sur le don* highlights the way fundamental acts of generosity create and sustain solidarities by overcoming "bad spirits" (*les mauvais esprits*).¹⁰ One of Mauss' insights that is especially suggestive for the problems of contemporary Europe concerns the way contractual economies remain fundamentally dependent on and inseparable from economies of the gift. There are always already multiple elements of asymmetrical giving involved in that which represents itself as symmetrical and reciprocal exchanges. The Romans, argues Mauss, still discerned the root *dare* – to give – in the word *vendere* – to sell.¹¹ A recent article by Fritz Scharpf published in the *Süd-deutsche*¹² provides an incisive statement of what might be at stake in Mauss' insight for contemporary Europe.

Scharpf's article highlights the complex interrelatedness between northern economic success and southern economic failure instructively. The introduction of the Euro weakened the German currency and boosted its manufacturing and ex-

porting capabilities. At the same time the industrially underdeveloped economies of Europe – Greece became the dramatic example – were saddled with a stronger currency than they could ever hope to sustain. Yoked to the same currency, manufacturing economies were bound to be catapulted into sustainable periods of growth (through already high and yet rising export levels) and non-manufacturing economies were bound to be caught up in prolonged periods of recession. (Their high and rising import levels, besides historically entrenched low productivity, could not be transformed significantly without expensive and basically unaffordable Euro-based capital investment. In any case, even with the best of intentions and commitment, this could not be changed over night.)

The South European economies could only hope to escape from the recession trap into which the Euro dumped them through extensive borrowing. Northern Europeans who are currently gripped by the fear of bringing pointless "gifts" to southern Europe and to Greece in particular (a remarkable reversal of Vergil's famous line *timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes*, one might observe) because of the latter's alleged unilateral failures to comply with basic principles of financial discipline, simply fail to acknowledge the extent to which the introduction of the Euro paralysed southern and boosted northern economies; the extent to which southern financial "indiscipline" was induced or co-induced by Euro-induced southern economic paralysis; and the extent to which northern economies were boosted even further by "undisciplined" southern borrowing. In other words, they fail to recognise the hidden asymmetries – the hidden gifts, one might say – that the Greeks had already contributed to the cycles of European economic exchange. Failure to comprehend these realities currently translates into a fear of bringing gifts that turns on an ignorance regarding gifts already received. Mauss' *Essai sur le don* may well alert Europeans again to the complexities of gift economies without which no contractual economy is possible. It may alert them to the reality that functional contractual relations are ultimately preconditioned by solidarities that acknowledge

„Einspruch gegen die Fassadendemokratie“

Jürgen Habermas zeichnet im August 2012 zusammen mit dem Philosophen Julian Nida-Rümelin und dem Ökonomen Peter Bofinger einen Ausweg aus der Krise auf. Der Beitrag für die *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* entstand auf Bitte des SPD-Vorsitzenden Sigmar Gabriel. Für die drei Intellektuellen kann die Lösung nur in einem Mehr an Europa bestehen. Denn nur so könne „das Unwesen des gespenstischen Paralleluniversums“ der Finanzindustrie gestoppt werden. Sie fordern die Bundesregierung auf, sich für die „Gründung eines politisch geeinten, kerneuropäischen Währungsgebietes“ einzusetzen. Der Bürger müsse aber an europäischen Entscheidungen beteiligt werden. Ihnen schwebt eine „supranationale Demokratie“ vor, die aber nicht in einen Bundesstaat führen soll. Nur ein geeintes Kerneuropa könne „den inzwischen fortgeschrittenen Prozess der Umwandlung der sozialstaatlichen Bürgerdemokratie in eine marktkonforme Fassadendemokratie“ aufhalten.

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Jürgen Habermas during a discussion in the Munich School of Philosophy (Wikimedia, Wolfram Huke, CC-BY-SA)

and accommodate respective strengths and weaknesses constructively.

Mauss' illumination of the basic conditions of functional economic exchanges provides a persuasive language for the creative political magnanimity that Europe now needs so urgently. Merkel has at times reminded Euro-sceptic Germans of the way Germany has benefitted from European economic integration. She needs to expand this language into one that communicates a profound and broad regard for the disadvantages that integration imposed on the weaker economies of Europe. Thus might she develop the understanding and cultivate the spirit that might overcome the destructive energies of mutual distrust and paralysing scepticism that currently frustrate meaningful European integration.

Economically stronger German states such as Bavaria have been funding basically bankrupt fellow states like the Saarland for many years without much ado. Merkel needs to develop a persuasive and inspiring rhetoric that may lead Germans to think about Greeks as fellow European citizens in the way Bavarians think of Saarlandians as fellow German citizens. She needs to embark on and communicate a vision in terms of which the sharing of German resources with Greece is a principle as unproblematic and self-evidently wise as the sharing of resources between German states. She has been quoted many times for having once observed that Germany's recourses are not unlimited. She can learn from Mauss that sharing is more likely to augment Germany's

resources than it is likely to diminish them. Many if not most economists would also be able to support this Maussian wisdom by telling her plausibly that Germany stands to gain much more from a strong solidary Europe than it stands to gain from exclusively or predominantly pursuing its own interests in a fragmented and struggling Europe.

Learning from Mauss in this regard may well require a leap of faith, given the way Mauss' wisdom takes leave of the apparently more common sense and therefore invariably forceful concerns with property, propriety and protestant austerity to which Merkel's CDU constituency is chained. This common sense property and propriety perspective indeed makes it hard and counter-intuitive to accept that sharing augments instead of diminishes. Many are bound to remain unconvinced should Merkel attain to better insights or yield to better insights she may well have already. Should this be the case, she can also learn from the way Mandela courageously acted on his own convictions to break the political impasse in South Africa in 1985. Should she do so, she may well risk losing her party political constituency in the process, but she will stand to gain a stature of statesmanship that will exceed the historical significance of a mere third term as German chancellor exponentially. Her present politics of indecision, on the other hand, runs the double risk of increasingly losing her constituency (on-going positive opinion polls cannot cover this base for her forever) and becoming, as Scalfari suggests, yet another German head of state who preferred to put Germany's interests

above Europe's with disastrous consequences for both.

Considerations of grand historical significance might seem to have gained the better here of an argument that aimed to question their invocation by Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin. However, the idea was or is surely not to dismiss the idea of historical significance entirely. The point is to have it conditioned by considerations of magnanimity and solidarity that might endow it with the profound humanity that conditioned Mandela's historical significance. *Großzügigkeit* before *Großsubjektivität* – that is the lesson we learn from Mauss and Mandela.¹³ ♦

1 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 August 2012, p. 33.

2 Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas*, Berlin Suhrkamp, 2011, p. 41.

3 *Vorwärts*, 2 February 2012, http://www.vorwaerts.de/Politik/Europa/23482/schluss_mit_feigheit.html

4 Jürgen Habermas, "Bringing the Integration of Citizens into Line with the Integration of States", 2012 (18) 4, *European Law Journal*, p. 485-488 at 488.

5 Scalfari "Das wäre die vierte Schuld", *Die Zeit*, 15 March 2012, p. 7.

6 Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk To Freedom*, London, 1994, p. 513.

7 *Financial Times*, 13 October 2011.

8 Cf. for instance *Faktizität und Geltung*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1992, p. 649.

9 Cf. Schmitt, *Verfassungslehre*, Berlin, Dunkcker & Humblot, 2003 (first published 1928), p. 4: "Verfassung im absoluten Sinne kann zunächst die konkrete, mit jeder existierenden politischen Einheit von selbst gegebene Daseinsweise bedeuten [...] Diesen Gesamtzustand politischer Einheit und sozialer Ordnung kann man Verfassung nennen [...] Der Staat hat nicht eine Verfassung [...] sondern [...] ist Verfassung. Die Verfassung ist seine 'Seele', sein konkretes Leben und seine individuelle Existenz."

10 Mauss, *Essai sur le don*, Paris, PUF, 2007 (first published 1924-1925), p. 97.

11 Mauss, *Essai sur le don*, p. 193.

12 Scharpf "Noch verteidigt Deutschland jeden Meter Boden", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 December 2011, p. 12.

13 This text relies substantially on two larger texts that can be accessed at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2127087 and http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2127122. Acknowledgement and thanks are due to Sibylle van der Walt for helpful critical comments on earlier drafts of the text above and the two earlier pieces, as well as to Christian Joerges for generous comments and exchanges of thoughts and literature in the course of writing all these pieces.