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REVIEW ESSAY

CHALLENGES TO EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Don Thieme

The New Totalitarian Temptation: Global Governance and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe, by Todd Huizinga. New York: Encounter Books, 2016. 272 pages. \$23.99.

Todd Huizinga writes that there is an emergent trend threatening to reverse some of the hard-won gains of democracy in Europe. He builds his critique on three lines of analysis: social-benefit-oriented governance, demography, and morality. Put differently, those might be money, people, and religion. It may be, Huizinga notes, that there is a “loss of faith and civilizational exhaustion” (p. 202) on both sides of the Atlantic, but it is more pronounced in Europe.

This should not be seen, though, as a book that bashes Europe or the European Union (EU). From start to finish, Huizinga evinces a strong admiration for Europe in both its collective and individual aspects. Instead, his purpose is twofold: (1) to explore the adjustment of politics and policies in Europe, and (2) to analyze what the implications for the United States might be. Huizinga frames the issue as Europe’s pursuit of what he labels a “soft utopia” that seeks compromise over confrontation and consensus over division.

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To this end, Huizinga organizes his work into six sections: one section each on the definition of soft utopia, the consequences of it, and case studies on it; one detailing an emergent approach to human rights; next, one covering the expansion of the Eurozone idea; and finally, one that circles back to soft utopia at a crossroads, in which he assesses the decisions the EU must make. He starts by noting that the EU is “exceedingly opaque,

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dauntingly complex, and full of mutually opposing currents and interests” (p. vii). This is not a unique observation, but the angle of analysis that Huizinga follows, seeking intersections of individuals, finances, and observed religion (sometimes more in the breach than in actual practice), frames the European experiment in progress.

The first step of Huizinga’s approach is to define what the EU is not: not uniform, not even, not equal, and not religious, with regions and peoples differing in degree in all these characteristics. At the same time, he highlights that the EU is a supranational organization with significant clout derived from its population base, its economy, and its research-and-development prowess, which enables the EU to attain greater influence than population or trade figures would indicate. His overarching point, though, is not the power of the EU considered in isolation but how that power evolves, its implications for Europe, and the possible lessons it provides for democratic traditions around the world. The unevenness of democracy across Europe, from Budapest to Bath, challenges governance and participatory politics that struggle with *vox populi* beliefs as they are, not as what Huizinga frames as the “EU elite” might wish them to be.

Huizinga’s background is in economics and policy, and the central third of *The New Totalitarian Temptation* focuses on the politics of the euro. This theme echoes throughout the work, and for those of an economic predilection, this is a quick, albeit fascinating, read. This focus, though, is diluted by interspersed observations and comments about a postreligious *kultur* in Europe that promotes individual rights at the expense of Christian values. While detractors may well point out that prior to the convulsions of the twentieth century the greatest bloodshed in Europe occurred during wars of religion, Huizinga’s point seems to focus at least as much on the transitive process as the morals (or lack thereof) themselves. When Huizinga stays focused on “euro-policies” he is on steadier political-philosophy grounds.

The unanswered questions of and competing visions for the future of Europe occupy a central space in Huizinga’s review of democracy under stress in this work. As a result of the “serious divergence of opinion—even diametric opposition” (p. 15), the cleavages among different nations, different classes, and different backgrounds are more pronounced, even as the EU seeks a homogenized political *kultur*. “The decades long trend [of] the destabilization of established politics [is] more apparent throughout Europe” (p. 192). This, however, raises the question left unanswered in Huizinga’s work: Given all the challenges of the European experiment in “deepening and widening,” what alternate pathways might take Europe toward a less totalitarian future? While he may be correct that the Rousseau-like tyranny of the majority is induced through malaise and

bureaucratic ossification, proponents of the EU point toward the overall maintenance of peace and prosperity over several decades. And, as some from the Visegrád nations observe, the closer one lives to the former Soviet Union, the better the EU looks.

Huizinga signals a philosophical approach—in addition to his religious and political economic approach—by drawing Jürgen Habermas into the discourse on the future of Europe. There is a David Hume–esque quality to this careful consideration of the “EUropean” experiment, which Huizinga does a good job of exploring, especially in chapter 3. This chapter in turn sets up the next section, which looks at the origins of political and economic organizational thought in the post–World War II decade. As Huizinga notes, there was a Kantian element to the pragmatic beginnings in steel and coal, seeking economic means to ensure perpetual peace, or at least to sustain reduced tensions. As much as Kant, however, John Maynard Keynes informed the “soft utopianism” of the Schuman declaration (May 9, 1950) with his thoughts in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919). Keynes did not survive to see the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlift, Warsaw Pact, or NATO, but three decades earlier he accurately had forecast the economics that drove the creation of what eventually would become the EU. Huizinga incorporates these themes in his exposition of a nuanced understanding of the flexible philosophy of the EU.

Yet the EU continues to face, and adapt to, challenges. The fall of the Soviet bloc; the rise of the euro; and the waves of migration, first from east to west, then from south to north, all challenge the EU in policy and practice. As Anne Applebaum suggests in “A Warning from Europe: The Worst Is Yet to Come” (*The Atlantic*, October 2018), eternal democracy is not guaranteed; rather, it must be nourished and reinforced through each crisis and in each generation. The purposeful ambiguity in each of the successive additions to the EU political structure reflects the convergences between the ideals of Schuman and the realities at the time of each new piece of proposed legislation. With each successive generation, Huizinga implies, the harsh memories of World War II and the decade of austerity and political challenge that followed war termination fade, and successive generations—motivated perhaps more by *la dolce vita* and less by fear—interpret anew just what *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* mean in application more than principle. The challenge, as Huizinga notes, is to stay focused on what makes the EU work as an enduring concept while remaining flexible enough to deal with the inevitable vagaries of fortune.

Huizinga develops a core distinction between religiosity and postmodern politics throughout his book that might best be summarized as “Europe’s new religion is human rights.” Huizinga traces the fallout of the French Revolution in the concept

of *laïcité*, the severance of religion from public life. Yet Europeans still need a core identity that extends past August vacations and André Rieu concerts, pleasant as those might be. The struggle—both in governance and in daily life—for Europeans, unable to define *Homo europaeus* in a manner that includes all and insults none, is the search for a common, bonding identity. Huizinga is harsh in his assessment of this attempt, calling it “bloodless and rootless, vague and vapid . . . satisfying no one” (p. 64). He attempts to paint a cautionary tale for the United States and other democracies, implying that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) is not dead just yet and that much work remains to be done as ruling elites balance pragmatic realities against enduring ideals.

In section 6, “Soft Utopia at a Crossroads,” Huizinga hints at Europe’s core challenge: the ability to sustain this soft utopia even as demographics, both inside and outside Europe, challenge some of the core preconditions to sustained wealth, increased health, and prolonged prosperity in a postindustrial era. The three chapters in the concluding section clearly identify existential challenges to the European experiment. While perhaps sounding the tocsin of alarm too harshly, Huizinga nonetheless provides the reader with a succinct summary of the extant problems threatening the delicate balance of European customs, history, geography, and demography. How to engage with the challenges while creating opportunities that will enable the expansion of Europe’s social structures, avoiding both war and poverty, is the complex problem facing both the local denizens and Strasbourg Eurocrats.

As Huizinga underscores, there are no certain predestined outcomes in Europe, and in a continent of such varied peoples, places, and policies, neither the pathway nor the end state is clearly visible. Europe, large and small, will continue to face complex problems. On a continent of such diversity, however, the prospect of a Brussels-led totalitarian system is unlikely, even as individual European nations, all dealing with politics as they are in their own states and nearby regions, contend with their own potential domestic impulses toward preserving sovereignty, redefined and reinforced. In illuminating this dichotomy with both promise and peril, Huizinga provides no small service for the discerning reader in *The New Totalitarian Temptation: Global Governance and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe*.