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Rethinking the debate of a European common language under the light of the Eurozone crisis

Abstract

The management of the Eurozone crisis, both in theory and praxis, has been mainly confronted and framed as a mere economic crisis with political ramifications. However, the reproduction of economic circulation does not depend only on the economic sphere, but also on questions of cultural circulation and cohesion. The maximization of the long-term efficiency of the economic management of the Eurozone crisis needs to include policies of strengthening the European cultural communication both on a symbolic and practical level. The Eurozone crisis has manifested the lack of a sufficiently developed European cultural identity able to prevent the moral division of cultures based on economic criteria. The social dialogue on the cultural management of the Eurozone crisis could be proven extremely beneficial for both the reintegration of the political and cultural dimensions to the European integration and the construction of a European solidarity system. In this direction, this paper discusses the possibilities and obstacles of enhancing the European cultural communication and strengthening the European identity by gradual promotion of a European bilingualism composed of, what could be called, an official European common language, along with the national ones. The empirical approach of the paper focuses on the significance of the European linguistic factor for the intra-European labor mobility.

Key words: Euro, Management, Crisis, European common language, labor mobility.

The Euro's new clothes

The stability and international power of currencies as symbols of national economy have historically served as a medium of the collective national identification and key variable of the national self-esteem. Based on this assumption the euro was projected by definition as a symbol with beneficial effects on the construction of a common European identity and European integration¹. For more than a decade the euro as a “European (economic) symbol and a unifying

medium on the way towards European integration”², has indeed been strengthening the European common identity, but then it had to be tested on its march towards the economic crisis. What was revealed with the European common identity’s “crash test” during the management of the Eurozone crisis? The European economic integration while actuating the euro as the epitome of its symbolic triumph and essentially as the primary medium of the European integration, excluded or compensated cultural, political and social European ties, related “to the motives and the attitudes of the citizens themselves”³. Not to be disregarded, that these are the ties which foster “a common will [...] the prospect of a common future”⁴ and a shared consciousness through which “the citizens of one nation must regard the citizens of another nation as fundamentally ‘one of us’ ”⁵.

The famous short tale *The Emperor’s new clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen resembles highly of the euro story. The euro aroused as the symbol of the European common identity and whoever questioned the supremacy of economic integration was directly labeled as anti-Europeanist. When the euro was marching from one member of the Eurozone to another, the political elites were praising the new era of stability, prosperity and increased international financial opportunities. However, apart from an abstract political rhetoric, the European common identity was politically, socially and culturally “naked”. The Eurozone crisis like the child in Andersen’s tale, revealed the cultural and political “nakedness” of the European integration, which, in its substance remained “economic”, and thus asymmetrically changeable and crisis-prone within the politically uncontrolled, complex international financial system. The management of the Eurozone crisis reproduced the pathogenesis of the European integration as it was primarily introduced and still remains to be an economic management, which completely ignores the cultural and political shattering of the European identity. Like the Emperor in Andersen’s tale, who continued his marching despite acknowledging his nakedness, the management of the Eurozone crisis has not provided any alternative strategy for creating cultural and political unifying mediums amongst the European citizens. The euro is still being projected by the European Commission as “a symbol of European identity, one of the strongest tangible symbols of European integration and the shared values of Europe, the European nations and Europeans themselves”⁶, identically to what it used to represent prior the crisis. Nevertheless, only 24% of the citizens of the euro area confirm that having euro makes them feel more Europeans than before having it⁷.

The efforts of the European elites to preserve the euro as a symbol of a shared European fate are part of the problem. Currently, the austerity measures in the southern Europe are producing a crisis of individual and collective identity, at the level of a collective traumatic episode, a fear of constant uncertainty which, for example, in the cases of Greece and Spain has been expressed in the form of hatred towards Germany⁸. According to Joachim Möller, director of the Institute for Employment Research in Nuremberg, high unemployment has immediate negative effects on the European integration and “long-term effects reach far beyond the working world [...] It could be catastrophic for their idea of Europe.”⁹

The maximization of the long-term efficiency of economic strategies requires a planning in relation, and not in isolation, to the cultural, political and social spheres of the European citizens. In this direction, the potentiality of a European common language as an interface of increasing the intra-European labor mobility and, at the same time, contributing to the management of the Eurozone crisis shall be discussed. Nevertheless, this research cannot be reduced to a mere question regarding the role of the linguistic factor in the European labor market and European competitiveness alone. It is an issue of high complexity, which needs to be associated with further research both on local and international analytical levels, including the role of European civil societies, cultural exchange, education and town twinning. However, the aim of the paper, which also outlines its limits, is to contribute to the resurgence of the relevance of the common European language for the European integration and the long-term management of the Eurozone crisis. The following chapters will answer to the strongest arguments of the opponents of such strategy.

Arguments against a common European language

The repression of languages, especially those of minority population has been historically associated with autocratic regimes “but over the last few years, multilingualism has been the direct consequence of democratization”¹⁰. The construction of the European common identity through the diversity of the European languages represents the European democratic political culture, summed up in the EU’s motto “Unity in Diversity”¹¹. In this sense, the European common language would be interpreted as a violation of that motto and “no country joined the union in order to be crushed under a homogenizing wheel”¹². In further support of this argument, language beyond its instrumental character as a medium of communication is interrelated with

individual and collective self and hetero-identification, signifying national and cultural historical achievements¹³. At the same time, the spatial dimension of collective identification also accentuates its relevance, as some languages are used only in specific geographical regions, while 91% of Europeans are attached to their country and more than 70% of all the EU citizens are attached to their home city, town or village¹⁴. Taking into account the current context of the Eurozone crisis and its ongoing controversial management, the attempt of promoting such a policy would trigger even more defensive nationalistic reactions, ending up in stimulating a disintegrative European dynamic rather than fostering a new path for further integration¹⁵.

Another argument against the common language interlinks the linguistic diversity with biodiversity¹⁶. According to this line of argumentation the linguistic diversity has a value itself as every language embodies the history and culture of each peoples¹⁷. By preserving the linguistic diversity, it is the cultural diversity that is actually preserved¹⁸. A world more culturally diverted, offers more possibilities for private and collective social experimentation leading to the growth of social benefits¹⁹.

The last argument sets limits to the political and economic impacts of the common European language²⁰ by highlighting the role of economic neoliberalism in the international political economy²¹. The Eurozone structure, unprotected as a whole, against economic crisis in lack of fiscal and political integration, the division between export-surplus and import-deficit countries, the gradual deterioration that the local productive sector of the European south confronts with and the politically uncontrolled intra-European financial flows, did not occur because European citizens did not speak a common language²². From this standpoint, the introduction of the common European language within an unchangeable or an unmodified neoliberal economic system based on the unequal division of international wealth in favor of the wealthier nations' interests, would barely impact the current uneven European economic development²³.

Promethean light on the path of intra-European labor mobility

“Prometheus: Yes, I caused mortals to cease foreseeing their doom

Chorus: Of what sort was the cure that you found for this affliction?

Prometheus: I caused blind hopes to dwell within their breasts.

Chorus: A great benefit was this you gave to mortals.

Prometheus: In addition, I gave them fire.

Chorus: What! Do creatures of a day now have flame-eyed fire?

Prometheus: Yes, and from it they shall learn many arts”²⁴.

The European Union symbolizes the first historical moment, when the idea of “Europe” was based on co-operation and not on conquest and war²⁵. The first moment, when the citizens of Europe “ceased foreseeing their doom”. The idea of a united Europe after the Second World War, was embraced as a “great gift” given to the people of Europe. A “blind hope”, which allowed them not to be historically enslaved in the past, but to create something out of it, for a better future. Then, the irony of the Chorus towards Prometheus came: “A great benefit was this you gave to mortals”, meaning that it was apparently not enough. Prometheus’s answer, “I gave them fire”, has taken, for the idea of united Europe the form of “I gave them the euro”. Then, the Eurozone crisis occurred and by the words of Manuel Baroso, President of the European Commission at that time:

“ In the face of these challenges, we can all be extremely proud that we have kept Europe united, open and made it stronger for the future. 'United', because we managed to keep Europe together and even enlarge it despite the pressures exerted on our countries [...] 'Stronger', because the necessary economic reforms are now being implemented across Europe and our economic governance has been reinforced, in particular in the Euro area, to make Europe’s economies fitter for globalization”²⁶.

Another contemporary Chorus has entered today the European scene, resembled by the millions of unemployed European citizens and leads to the same ironic answer: “a great benefit was this that you gave to us”. Could a modern European Promethean answer be: “I gave them a common language” and can the European citizens “learn many arts” from it? Is such proposal realistic and historically relevant? Today, only 3.3% of the total EU labor force work and live in another member state while the annual EU mobility is estimated for the period 2011-2012 to the incredible low 0,2%²⁷. For instance, that is 13.5 times lower than the US corresponding percentage²⁸. Moreover, beyond the myths of mass intra-European movements and despite a rise in absolute terms, of the labor mobility in the second phase of the Eurozone crisis, starting from

2011, the total rise of the European mobility between 2005 and 2013 has been barely increased by 1,2%²⁹. “Poor language skills and cultural difference present the greatest hurdles to geographic mobility in Europe”³⁰. Throughout the current section some of the main arguments against the common European language shall be elucidated.

The first argument is that European Union’s political democracy is being reflected in the promotion of the unity in cultural and linguistic diversity. Perhaps, surprisingly enough for the advocates of this argument, the introduction of the common European language has actually already taken place, though not yet in law, but in the institutionalized practices of the EU. Robert Phillipson, a well-known supporter of linguistic diversity against of what he calls “linguistic hegemony” writes that “most EU texts are now initially drafted in English [...] a monolingual culture and mindset within EU institutions affects content as well as form. The Commission operates exclusively in English”³¹. The question here is whether or not English could be promoted from an administrative language to the common language of the European labor market. Once again, the answer has already been given by the history. The introduction of the common language in the example of the nation building process has already shown that if “an elite literary or administrative language exists, however small the number of its actual users, it can become an important element of proto-national cohesion”³². In 1789, for instance, only 12-13% of the French spoke French ‘correctly’ and 50% of them did not speak at all³³. During the Italian unification in 1860 only 2,5% of the population used Italian in their everyday life, whereas in the eighteenth’s century Germany, there were “at most 3-500,000 readers of works in the literary vernacular, and the almost certainly much smaller number who actually spoke the ‘Hochsprache’ or culture-language for everyday purposes”³⁴. As for today, the social receptiveness of English already exists, as English is by far the most widely common foreign spoken language in Europe and “two thirds of Europeans (67%) consider English as one of the two most useful languages for themselves”³⁵. Moreover, “around four in five Europeans (79%) consider English as one of the most useful languages for the future of the children”³⁶.

The nationalistic tensions around Europe, especially among the youth population are based on the lack of perspective on their future; the future of no employment and political or social vision. It is well known that, for example, the southern Europe presents very high youth unemployment rates (under 25s). In particular, in Spain, 51.4%, Greece 50,6%, Italy 42% and Portugal 34,5%,

while the lowest percentages in the EU are located in Germany, 7,2% and in Austria 9%³⁷. Although Germany has a serious shortage of skilled workers, the overall percentage of Greeks able to speak German (determined as understanding well enough to follow the news on radio or television) is 3%, those of the Italians are 2%, and only 1% of the Spanish and Portuguese 1%³⁸. A research by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has also shown that only one out of two Greeks coming to Germany in order to work, are staying longer than one year and one out of three Spaniards³⁹. A bilingual Europe, including English as its official language along with the national ones, can strengthen both the cultural and political communication between the European citizens and the integration of the European labor market. Nonetheless, “telling 26 of 28 EU countries that of course they can keep their cute little languages, but that all serious stuff (business, academic work, legislating) must be done in English, is asking them to accept second-class linguistic citizenship”⁴⁰. The argument that the introduction of a new common language will be necessarily related to the national loss of the first-class linguistic citizenships and cultural identities, and thus will trigger national resistances from below, is historically inaccurate⁴¹. “From the point of view of poor men looking for work and to better themselves in a modern world there was nothing wrong with peasants being turned into French-men or Poles and Italians in Chicago learning English and wishing to become Americans”⁴². Many historical examples have already shown that the “decline of localized or small-circulation languages existing by the side of major languages, does not need to be explained by the hypothesis of national linguistic oppression”⁴³. In addition to this, it has been historically observed that a social resistance is more likely to occur when people are forced to be taught a language of limited circulation rather than on the demand of an exclusive education in their own language⁴⁴.

The second main argument against the European common language was based on the importance of linguistic diversity as a means of preserving the cultural diversity. This argument ignores the fact that most of the European languages were actually resulted as part of a social engineering between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century⁴⁵. A common national language is a social product of political purposes, including many historical, linguistic changes with no cultural continuance. “Especially when forced into print, acquired a new fixity which made it appear more permanent and hence (by an optical illusion) more ‘eternal’ than it really was”⁴⁶.

The last argument claims that the common European language will not establish significant changes if the neoliberal economic structure of the Eurozone remains unchangeable. The importance of the European common language should not be evaluated through what cannot be changed, but on how it can contribute to the long term management of the Eurozone crisis. It has been estimated that till 2035 Germany will have a shortage of four million high skilled workers⁴⁷. Nevertheless, German companies are still more inclined to spend money for initial training, additional training and raising wages rather than recruiting skilled labor from abroad⁴⁸. From 2010 till the beginning of 2013 the number of German businesses and industries that see the shortage of skilled-labor as a serious developing risk for their business outlook has been doubled⁴⁹. A common European language would benefit both the great number of high skilled unemployed European workers and the European businesses to become more competitive. Will the accumulation of high-skilled workers only benefit the recipient countries and render even weaker the already non-competitive economies? A common language should not be seen as a ‘solution’ for economic structural problems and be criticized from this point of view, but rather seen as it is, a common language which can facilitate the economic and political co-operation of the European citizens along with the cultural strengthening of the European identity and communication.

A political conclusion

The limits of incorporation of the European identity to the European monetary circulation have been manifested in the course of the management of the Eurozone crisis. The extremely low intra-European labor mobility has been identified as a bottom up economic blockage for the construction of a common European identity. This economic blockage embodies political and cultural contents which need to be addressed within the question of the cultural dimension of the coherence of the European labor market. The paper aimed to introduce the relevance of the dialogue on the common European language not only as a strict response to the question of material and social reproduction but also as a means of strengthening the European communication. It did so, by confronting some main opposing arguments with political, cultural and economic origins. However, the initiative character of the paper left a lot of space for further

research on the cultural depth of such a strategy and the potential experimental ways of its realization. In conclusion, as Hobsbawm notes, what is crucial for the introduction of a common language is not its popularity, but the political power of the elites who want to introduce it⁵⁰. Has the EU a political power to promote the European common language beyond its internal institutional level? As the management of the Eurozone crisis goes on, the only thing for sure is that “alas, after a certain age every man is responsible for his face”⁵¹ and likewise the form of the union that Europe will have.

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