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A crisis on the scale of Covid-19 leaves its mark on the political imagination, but what kind of mark is less clear. In one perspective, periods of crisis are enhancing. They provide demonstration of the fragility of the *status quo* and the possibility of doing things differently – things that expand our horizons. Variations on this idea have recurred in Europe and North America for several years. In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, many observers felt that the scope for political agency, especially that of the state, had been reaffirmed. Neoliberal discourses about the limits of authorities' capacity to act in economic affairs seemed to have been undone by governments' moves to support failing banks. Faced with an unpalatable alternative, institutions suddenly found the resources and will to act. Never again, felt some, would authorities be able to present themselves as incapable of intervention – they could present themselves only as unwilling. In this reading, the extraordinary policy measures taken in response to a crisis open new political vistas, showing that other worlds are possible. Once drastic measures have been taken, albeit in the name of necessity, a precedent exists for their redeployment in the future, this time perhaps of volition.

In a second perspective, the political meaning of a crisis is quite the reverse – it is to introduce new constraints on the possible. The effect of taking drastic measures to handle a difficult situation is seen as being exactly to rule out further actions of this kind. This was the argument that underpinned the austerity policies adopted by EU states through much of the 2010s. The claim was that the debts incurred in 2008 had placed such a burden on state finances that spending would now have to be radically reduced. Actions taken in the crisis were thus cast as wholly exceptional. In this view, not only

does it not follow that measures taken of necessity may later be repeated: rather, the very fact that they have been adopted once rules out the possibility of their adoption for the foreseeable future. Rather than opening new political horizons, in this view crises close them down.

Variations on these two positions, which are part of political discourse as much as analysis, have been prominent in the context of Covid-19.¹ One sees the idea that crises broaden the scope of the possible in the notion that the pandemic response provides a template for fighting climate change.² The willingness of governments to impose lockdowns and restrict travel, slowing economic activity and profit accumulation for an indeterminate period, has been widely highlighted as evidence that action on climate change is possible if only governments recognise the seriousness of the threat. Crises in this view demonstrate the potential for more ambitious, activist forms of government. (Such arguments recall the early-twentieth-century origins of the welfare state in the transferral of wartime mobilisation to peacetime government.) Conversely – often by the powerful – the pandemic has been cast as presenting new *obstacles* to political agency. It has been recruited to justify sticking more closely to the status quo ante, on the idea that alternatives are now harder to pursue. As a British Conservative MP declared in spring 2021, “everybody in an ideal world would love to see nurses paid far more [...] but we are coming out of a pandemic where we have seen huge borrowing and costs to the government” (Dorries 2021). Nurses would have to make do with a 1% rise.

In truth, neither the crisis-as-enabling perspective nor the crisis-as-disabling one gets it right. Contra the second perspective, there is no necessary reason why crises should signal a major diminution of

¹ For simplicity in this short piece I restrict discussion to these two paradigmatic approaches, but it is worth noting the existence of variations, including transformations that are dystopian rather than progressive. Consider, for instance, how the use of new technology during the pandemic – for remote learning, public health surveillance, and healthcare – has been embraced by some as demonstrating the potential to do away with a range of jobs in the public and private sectors, albeit at the cost of heightened unemployment and worsened working conditions. On the ‘Screen New Deal’, see Klein 2020.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55498657>.

agency. Not all initiatives cost more money than they generate, and to the extent that they do there tend to be borrowing options available. The suggestion that there are not was the great fallacy of austerity. Policy-makers have been able to ‘find the money’ more than once – in the banking crises of the early 2000s, but also in the lockdowns of the early 2020s. Yet contra the first perspective, one needs to be cautious in assuming that crisis-led actions demonstrate the breadth of options available. First, the condition of these acts of agency may be that they can be credibly presented as responding to necessity – pursued in other contexts, they would surely be harder to carry off. Second, another condition of their adoption is likely to be belief that they do not challenge existing interests and priorities in a fundamental way. However activist crisis decision-making may be, and however many policy innovations it may include, very often it is in the service of existing commitments and the status quo ante. New means are adopted, and old ones discarded, but generally for the sake of established ends – this is change in the name of fidelity (White 2017), and agency that is kept in the hands of the few. The prospects for redeploying such agency for transformative, democratically-chosen ends are therefore a separate matter.

The European Union as it emerges from Covid-19 is the object of such competing interpretations today. Invoking the optimistic logic of enablement, many herald the policy measures associated with *NextGenerationEU* as something more than a temporary regime, as evidence of the obsolescence of austerity thinking and the beginning of something new. In this view, policy-makers have been forced of necessity to develop innovative mechanisms of collective borrowing, common debt and quantitative easing, and however much they may have presented these as exceptional measures to stabilise the situation at hand, the effect is to establish a lasting precedent. Confronted with the crisis, authorities are said to be on the cusp of a new economic outlook that can be harnessed for a new set of projects, including a Green New Deal.³

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en. Important to note here is that policy-makers can use extreme circumstances to rationalise shifts they were inclined to make anyway, either because previous (austerity) policies were increasingly dysfunctional or unpopular. An emergency context allows decisions to be presented as responses to necessity. Whereas under ‘nor-

It seems premature though to see the pandemic response as transformational in this way, for it remains consistent with the reassertion of existing economic priorities. Not only was the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* agreed by the European Council in July 2020 explicitly presented as temporary.⁴ The grants it makes available come with additional monitoring powers for the Commission and Council, and an emergency brake allows any national government to suspend the process should it have concerns about the direction of reform.⁵ Access to its funds is thus conditional on commitment to the agenda of existing policy,⁶ and the possibility of turning the tap off, even if temporarily, becomes a way to enforce this agenda. There have been no moves to write off the sovereign debts of eurozone member-states. It is hard to exclude then that austerity policies may return as a way to balance budgets. It was the mistake of many social democrats in the wake of 2008 to assume that a taboo on high public spending had been definitively broken – that the crisis would be enabling in this sense. This overlooked the resonance that the austerity argument would have, including with mass publics. How far things have really changed today is likely to become apparent only when a left-wing government comes to power in a eurozone member-state and embarks on a policy of high spending and wealth redistribution.

The handling of the pandemic as an opportunity for retrenchment is also evident in the sphere of migration. Since March 2020, EU member-states have invoked the health emergency as a pretext for stripping back the assistance given to refugees and asylum seekers. Securing the public health of the national population has been taken to warrant closing national borders to outsiders, hence e.g. quarantine ships in Italy

mal' conditions a policy reversal may invite charges of inconsistency or lack of principle, taken under emergency conditions it can be cast as a pragmatic response to changed conditions. Emergencies help policy reversals to be rationalised in a way that upholds the credibility of the policy-maker.

⁴ See Art. 4 of the Council Conclusions: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>.

⁵ Arts. 18-19.

⁶ I.e. that anchored by the 'European Semester', as emphasised by Economy Commissioner Gentiloni: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_960.

and the suspension of asylum applications in Greece.⁷ At a European level, the Commission's new *Pact on Migration and Asylum* of September 2020 states one of its aims as hardening the EU's external borders, and it allows states to derogate from asylum commitments in situations of crisis.⁸ The *Pact* seeks also to increase the involvement of third countries (e.g. Turkey) in controlling migration and processing claims, externalising responsibility beyond Europe's borders and encouraging return migration.⁹ Frontex meanwhile has expanded its activities into the air, with drones that can monitor migrants at sea at lower cost and without being diverted into rescue.¹⁰ In these ways, Covid-19's double threat to public health and to public finances has been used effectively but not progressively. The crisis acts as the occasion for new measures, but these are directed at reinforcing existing goals and entrenching the *status quo* rather than cultivating the agency with which to break from it.

Crises then, just as they promise to push back the limits of the possible, give defenders of the existing order a pretext on which to seek to consolidate it and to argue the impossibility of meaningful change (White 2019). We should be cautious in seeing the EU as fundamentally transformed by recent events, or newly capable of transformation. Certainly there has been extensive policy activity, and quite possibly there is the opportunity to push for more change – the idea that crises are disempowering in a general sense is false. One can only find the boundaries of the possible by testing them, and to this extent there is reason to cultivate public pressure. But it is too early to say that these boundaries have been significantly pushed back. Politically it may be useful to act as though they have been, but analytically there are reasons to hold back.

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/how-covid-19-became-a-cover-to-reduce-refugee-rights-156247>.

⁸ 23 September 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706); for critical commentary see <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/08/pact-migration-and-asylum>.

⁹ See also the *New EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration* (27 April 2021), to be supported by Frontex (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1931).

¹⁰ <https://fragdenstaat.de/en/blog/2021/08/24/defund-frontex-build-sar/>.

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Critical Exchange on *NextGenerationEU*

‘Once in a Lifetime’? An Immanent Critique of *NextGenerationEU*

Kalypso Nicolaïdis

“*NextGenerationEU* is more than a recovery plan – it is a once in a lifetime chance to emerge stronger from the pandemic, transform our economies and societies, and design a Europe that works for everyone. We have everything we need to make this happen. We have a vision, we have a plan and we have agreed to invest €806.9 billion together”.¹

To help the continent “emerge stronger and more resilient” from the worst pandemic in 100 years, member states created the *NextGenerationEU* (NGEU) programme almost as soon as the crisis hit in the Spring of 2022. ‘Once in a lifetime’ to describe the NGEU could sound pretty bombastic in light of three facts: 1) the sums constitute only a small proportion of EU GDP; 2) many of the projects supported have been part of existing commitments; 3) the new facilities are for the moment presented as temporary and will eventually need to be paid back by some sort of tax (inflationary, corporate, or customs).

If this were the whole story then, we could be forgiven for deflating the ‘once in a lifetime’ claim. As Jonathan White cogently argues in his contribution, crisis can be horizon-expanding or horizon-shrinking. They can lead to policies that open new political vistas, pushing back the limits of the possible, or on the contrary policies that constrain our collective agency, giving defenders of the existing order a pretext on which to seek to consolidate it. NGEU might talk-the-talk, but it may not be as transformative as it sounds.

¹ This figure is in current prices. It amounts to €750 billion in 2018 prices (https://europa.eu/next-generation-eu/index_en).

Here, I cautiously push back against this argument from an immanent critique standpoint, by juxtaposing the ideals articulated by the pandemic response against their inadequate but potentially promising realization. Accordingly, we ought to consider the potential open by the NGEU not just as the material injection of funds that it is, nor even the legal-institutional implication of a first European mutualisation of debt, but rather as both a potential trigger and an expression of two (incomplete) shifts in EU policies with important implications for the EU polity.

The first shift has to do with what we can call ‘deference with purpose.’ Considering that relations between states are characterised by an ever shifting balance between mutual deference and mutual interference, crisis tend to lead to new equilibria between the two that may or may not be enshrined in new rules. In this sense, the EU is constantly revisiting Europe’s Westphalian bargain, which simultaneously enshrined sovereign recognition and therefore deference, and its conditionality and therefore interference, reminding us that states’ recognition of each other’s autonomy tends to be predicated on their *droit de regard* inside each other’s realm, as a function of mutual trust. The Euro-crisis will be remembered as a moment when EU institutions presided over a radical jump in asymmetric mutual interference allowance under the cover of debt, combining in effect the traditional creditors playbook *à la* IMF, with the much more far reaching core competences of the EU, which turned the shared polity into the kind of enforcer which hitherto had been a role reserved for externally and temporarily involved agents like the IMF.

Against this backdrop, NGEU on the other hand, can be seen as a shift of the pendulum back to deference, based as it is on a bottom up process of national commitments. In order to access the funds, the member states need to present ambitious investment programme which integrate the digital and climate transition imperatives. The Commission allocates budgetary envelopes to the member states which generate their own distribution key between projects. To be sure, EU monitoring and its concurrent emergency break is still part of the equation but linked less to financial solvency than to the contribution to shared purposes.

The second shift is more tentative and has to do with the modes and extent of accountability associated with the first shift. It may be premature to say that horizontal interference between states has been replaced

by accountability *all the way down* at the domestic level bolstered by transnational networks. Here the mutual engagement which accompanies the sharing of funds extends beyond the diplomatic realm, taking place under the implicit auspices of the public sphere and the interconnected democracy spaces of the member state. At stake is indeed the question of whether the agency regained by EU institutions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic can be put to work for transformative, democratically-chosen ends, as Jonathan White puts it.

Whether this double shift is actually at work remains to be seen but I believe that it has to do as much with our political imagination as with the constellation of economic interests that will direct the combined hands of the market and the state involved in delivering NGEU. Put simply, what is at stake with the NGEU is whether it will serve as a conduit for the reinvention of Europe's greatest asset in the face of the global autocratic onslaught: democratic authorship and the collective intelligence that comes with it.

This appeal to our democratic imagination rests on a simple diagnostic regarding public opinion in the EU. Scholars like Virginie Ingelgom, Catherine DeVries or Sarah Hobolt have demonstrated that 'the median European' is neither Eurosceptic nor Europhile but that Europeans tend to be integrationist in substance and sovereigntist in method. They approve of 'more Europe' to address crisis like a pandemic, but also of more decentralised, local engineering of crisis response. In this spirit, we need to manage democratic interdependence between its member states all the way down, progressively promoting norms and processes that connect national democratic conversations horizontally supported but not captured vertically by Brussels.

This is what I mean when I say that the EU can be understood as a 'demoiracy' in the making, a union of peoples who govern together but not as one, where a shared political identity resides with the empowerment of national democracy by the center and with caring about what happens in our respective national or subnational democratic space, spaces that are becoming increasingly politically vulnerable to each other. For sure European demoiracy is unstable and vulnerable, given the centrifugal and centripetal forces of bureaucratic centralization and populist renationalization that feed each other's justificatory narratives. But this makes the challenge all the more appealing.

I like to take up the challenge through a metaphor: I suggest to imagine post-WWII Europeans who, contemplating a sea of possible futures ahead of them, argued intensely over the better way to leave behind the dreary land of anarchy, nationalism and war. There was a sense that they should all board the same ship together, but to chart what route? If we further imagine the waters to be a very wide Rubicon, many felt that it was time to cross it to reach the promised land on the other side, a land of unity where Europeans would become one and forge a new entity together from the ashes of their defunct nations, thus transcending together the old European order of states. Some boarded the ship believing this would happen.

But the ship of European states, instead of crossing to the other side, ended up tracing a different route. They would not sail to reassuring land of unity – reinventing themselves as a Euro-wide nation, same old on a bigger scale. They would not exchange a failed order of nation-states for a continental European state. They would neither maintain nor transcend Europe's state system but instead transform it by taming the exclusionary nature of sovereignty. Away from both shores, they would remain on the choppy waters of the Rubicon for the foreseeable future. On the waters in between the journey would have to continue in search of a compass but without a telos to justify it all.

Such a democratic vision of what the EU is about, I believe, is much more ambitious than the dream of those who advocate making it ever more state-like, ever more centralised and harmonized (or 'federal' in the traditional way). Refusing to cross the Rubicon it is the most ambitious reading of what European integration is about: deep horizontal mutual recognition through democratic agency to allow for togetherness among utterly diverse peoples. The paradox of this EU third way is thus: the most densely institutionalised cooperation among states in the world, yet between the most deeply entrenched nation-states in the world. Hence the Rubicon.

We have long bemoaned the fact that something is clearly missing in European politics these days, asking how the union can better catch winds in her sail. The conference on the future of Europe taking place this year is exploring ways to experiment with transnational democratic innovation. Indeed, these efforts are not happening in a vacuum. In the decades to come, 'democracy in Europe' is bound to be part of a bigger story about

democratic geopolitics or, to use grand words, system resilience in the competition between autocracies and (imperfect) democracies and their respective capacity to generate investment in the long term. Bolstered by the pandemic response, autocrats are shaping a new kind of technology-centric cyber-citizenship governance that will make their own people pawns in the grand chess game. To face this ominous prospect we need nothing less than all-out democratic mobilization— accelerating the spin of a circular democracy which (just like calls for a circular economy and circular migration) advocates exploiting the connectedness between spaces and levels of democratic practices in all their guise.

This is a global story. In fact, when it comes to reinventing democracy, Europe would be well inspired to reverse its gaze. Europe's founding fathers may be forgiven to have brought into being a highly 'constrained' democracy given the ambers on which it was built. But today, EU decision makers and shapers, and the citizens who call for taking part can't be comfortable with a construct in the name of democracy built by democracy-sceptics.

If NGEU were to set off a process of genuine public accountability there would be hope for the EU to stand out in the landscape of democratic experiments not by claiming to be 'more advanced' than the rest of the world, but by investing in scaling up the kind of participatory and digital democracy that has burgeoned around the world from the national or subnational level to the transnational, and from the vertical to the horizontal. In this spirit, we must pay close attention to how effective democratic control of NGEU will in the next months and years connect taxation, representation and participation, following the triple rationale of democratic imperative which I will sketch here in closing.

1) *No spending without taxation*. The NGEU cannot escape the old imperative: new debts are bound to imply new responsibilities. There will be mighty political fights in the future which will unfold in the public arena: whether the spending will be covered by old or new taxes. How to balance EU fiscal autonomy with national fiscal primacy and the distributional implications for richer and poorer member states. To what extent EU-wide taxes ought to mirror EU-wide benefits – from taxes on GAFAs for the benefit of EU-wide digital infrastructures to a carbon border tax for the benefit of an EU-wide ETS. After all, the new taxes will bare important

implications for each European citizens, even if on corporations and/or at the border, given fiscal crowding out, induced inflation etc. The core democratic tensions between considerations of distributional fairness and electoral savviness are bound to be at play. In all of these ways and more, the hike in taxation opened up by NGEU will need have crucial democratic implications.

2) *No taxation without representation*. Whereby extensive monitoring and reporting mechanisms have been put in place to support the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* (RFF) as the key instrument at the heart of *NextGenerationEU*. They provide benchmarks to the public on how the funds are used in different countries according to alternative criteria of output and outcome, collated in databases such as FENIX. The implementation of the RFF raises the fundamental question of who 'represents' in this game with competing claims of representativeness from different institutions and levels of governance. If, unsurprisingly, the disbursement of funds has led to a shift of power from the co-legislators to the Commission, and therefore a significant increase executive power, how do we balance the latter's claim to represent the public interest (backed by the European Court of auditor), the Council's claim individually to represent national legitimacy and collectively to represent states anchored in democratic process, and the European parliament's claim to represent 'European citizens' (as reflected by the debates and statements of the EP's standing working group on parliamentary scrutiny). In this context, democratic ownership and scrutiny may have shifted to national level but this shift has been embedded in transnational debate on shared purposes.

In short, the NGEU offers two modes of scrutiny: First, a policy mode where country programmes are assessed and audited on the basis of performance based criteria, gathered in an aptly named FENIX data base (is this about the rebirth the structural fund machinery?) where disbursement follows investment performance. Second, an ethical mode based first and foremost on national systems which control ex-post for fraud or conflict of interest, monitored by the Commission (see ARARCHNE data base).

On both counts, this gap in reimbursement opens up the potential for expanded scrutiny since assessing whether funds have been spent appropriately tends to require time. But how democratic has this scrutiny been until now or is likely to be? Have governments published the data

in accessible ways? What is the optimal democratic division of labour in the process?

These questions vary depending between two different moments in the RFF cycle:

- a) The *ex-ante* approval process of the spending plans where one would expect a primary (budgetary) role for national parliaments to mitigate the risk that executives both be judge and party. Up to now however, and while of course every country operates under a different tradition of parliamentary control, such scrutiny has generally been wanting. Some argue that national parliaments cannot be involved in the details of every sectoral allocation but need to set budgetary priorities and overall rules of conduct (in Italy for instance the parliament added an obligation to channel 40% of the funds to the South). Is this sufficient? How should this process relate to electoral cycles? What happens with a change of government in the middle of the procedure? Should the European Parliament fill the gap of time consistency?
- b) When it comes to the execution of the plans through procurement and specific projects, question of scrutiny become all the more critical. To what extent should control remain mainly retroactive as it is today? The current process emphasizes targets and the role of national control and audit system (CAS) which needed to be in place before the plans. (rooted in national legislation and the structural funds machinery). In theory the EU acts as a power of enabler, allowing for instance parliaments to hold hearing and ask the CAP agency for detail. But what kind of data is made available to them? On what grounds can they assess projects? Should the European parliament be given a greater role to assess performance on top of the Commission's more narrow or technical assessment of outcomes based on milestones and targets? And if the EP's role is to introduce greater political judgement in these assessments, should it not work closely with national parliaments?

3) *No representation without participation*. This is indeed the broader context in which the unfolding of NGEU takes place, a context where the EU increasingly recognises that participatory democracy is no longer a mere

appendix to representative institutions but deserves an eco-system in its own right. Under this premise, the spending of the funds needs to be scrutinized by any actor who wishes to and is able to do so, thus bringing to bear the wealth of collective intelligence in deploying the EU’s resources. The general public, the media and the organisations involved in formal and informal activism may stand at the end of long chains of scrutiny, but they are the ultimate stakeholders in the kind of democratic control called for by such an ambitious programme. Unfortunately, beyond being informed on their country’s or region’s performance of specific targets, monitoring does not extend to the project level whereby the public would be granted the means for granular assessment of ‘where the money goes’.

To be sure, even if degrees of transparency vary between member states, and between different levels of government, no member state seems to have embraced the idea of radical transparency to enhance the legitimacy and efficacy of the funds. To counter this state of affairs, the [recovery files project](#) initiated by the Dutch company [follow the money](#), has gathered journalists from about 20 member states to conduct their own assessment and transparency advocacy. As they point out, even the European Court of Auditors has recognised that it does not have enough resources to scrutinise properly. An early mover, the *Coalición Pro Acceso* and the Open Generation EU Platform have publicly called on the Spanish government to open the files. And the Helsinki committee in Hungary have demonstrated risks of government led corruption in its preliminary reports, nepotism, with EU moneys often used to subsidise political messaging against EU. More generally, social partners across countries have started to question on what grounds country strategies can assess what is ‘incomplete reforms’ (as in judiciary, pensions, labour markets, tax) which were traditionally negotiated with social partners and stakeholder.

The compass for such a journey has an old democratic pedigree: inclusion. In some ways, the process of deepening the reach of democracy remains the same as it has been: a series of struggle to expand the franchise, to include more citizens under its tent. This time around, it is a franchise that does not necessarily express itself through the right to vote in periodic elections, but rather through widespread inclusion in the political process in all its forms, including the process of allocating

the biggest funding drive ever available in the EU. I have suggested elsewhere the idea of subverting the ominous idea of Bentham's surveillance panopticon to herald the creation of a *democratic* panopticon, whereby decision-makers, like Bentham's prison inmates, will be effectively compelled to regulate their own behavior under the assumption that citizens might be watching at least some of the time, their power both visible and unverifiable. Publicity takes the place of surveillance, a way to guard the guardians, and social control becomes control by society, not of society. In effect, what we should be advocating in the age of the internet and widespread literacy is a kind of monitory democracy on steroids, as one element of a broader democratic ecosystem in the EU. The implementation of the NGEU can serve as the testing ground for such a democratic panopticon. Forget la revolution permanente, long live la participation permanente.

The 2010s put the EU to a severe test of political sustainability. The sequence of sectoral shocks produced a ‘deep’ crisis, which has unsettled basic assumptions and practices regarding the exercise of authority and its legitimation. Over time, tensions and disagreements unleashed three foundational conflicts: over sovereignty (who decides), solidarity (who gets what when and why) and identity (who we are). Around the middle of the decade, the idea of an ‘existential crisis’ became something more concrete than just a rhetorical metaphor.

Against the odds, however, the destructive spiral stopped short of driving the Union into self-destruction. After the Brexit referendum, opinion data and the aggressive proclaims of many Eurosceptic parties showed alarming signs of a possible withdrawal domino – from the EU altogether or from the Euro-area. Yet the only member state which risked to succumb to confusion and, in some crucial moment, internal implosion was the UK itself. The other 27 manifested an increasing willingness to keep together and displayed a remarkable unity in Brexit negotiations, reconfirming their loyalty to the integration project.

In its turn, the pandemic outburst in early 2020 triggered off initially another spiral of mutual hostility and acrimony between the member states. Yet, in the space of just a few months, the acute tensions between the frugal and the solidaristic coalitions rapidly subsided and a financial plan of unprecedented size and ambition was adopted in July 2020. While – as rightly argued by Jonathan White – it is still too early for proclaiming the end of the deep crisis, it seems safe to say that in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis the Union has been able to increase the political and institutional capital for its own polity maintenance.

Is it possible to identify a general mechanisms which can account for both the crisis-proneness exhibited by the EU during the long 2010s and at the same time its capacity to survive and exploit crises for mobilising self- maintenance resources? Answering this question requires a preliminary discussion about the nature of the EU as polity – more precisely, a polity which has opted for navigating along the Rubicon (as aptly put by Kalympo Nicolaidis) instead of crossing it and joining the ranks of federal states.

EU-building has been an incremental process aimed at embedding and bringing together previously autonomous nation-states in the pursuit of ‘peace and prosperity’. Integration was launched within a historical context in which the state-national form had already reached its apex. Thus the construction of the EU polity had to take place in the least favourable constellation, i.e. on top of those compact and robust political entities which had resulted from the long term process of state- and nation-building.

These genetic constraints posed to EU builders a double bind: creating a de novo polity through piecemeal reconfigurations of the pre-existing state-national structures; managing this delicate political and institutional process in the presence of ‘the ordeals of mass politics’, i.e. under the limitations and pressures linked to nation-based process of consensus-building and democratic legitimation. Thus EU building has called for a constant and delicate balancing act between unity and diversity, functional and political dynamics: a feature which can be captured by defining the Union as an ‘experimental’ polity. Experimentalism is a mode of governing typically associated with federations, which have to reconcile unitary constitutional foundations with high degrees of local differentiations and a fragmented division of powers. In the lack of a fully-fledged constitution, experimentalism has characterised EU polity formation from the start. This process has in fact involved the search for new ways and modes of combining the classical triad of boundaries, authority and social bonds as well as defining what it means for the member states to remain together and to engage in an ‘ever closer union’.

This mode of development has inherently exposed the EU to the challenge of political disruption. Take the process of providing the new polity with a coherent and sustainable configuration of boundaries and binding authority. In historical state building, this was essentially

a one-way process of external demarcation and power centralisation, facing a limited and manageable resistance from relatively weak local rulers. In EU building, this process has instead split in two parts: a *pars destruens*, i.e. the internal removal of pre-existing inter-state boundaries and the gradual disempowerment of domestic authorities, and a *pars construens*, i.e. the reconstruction of pan-EU boundaries and central institutions. This double process has been much more complicated than historical state building and has inevitably raised formidable challenges: boundary removal and power transfer tend to undermine national political structures and prompt their resistance to ‘opening’; the EU finds it hard to reconstruct an adequate and coherent boundary and authority configuration and to counterbalance domestic instability, possibly unleashing vicious disintegrative dynamics. A similar syndrome affects the also a third dimension, i.e. the Europeanisation of identities and solidarities.

More than six decades of increasing integration show however that the EU has been able to make a virtue of necessity. Observing the way in which integration has advanced, one is tempted to quote the lapidary comment that Samuel Johnson once made about a dog walking on its hind legs: “it was not a good walk, but what is surprising is that it managed to do it somehow”. EU polity builders have so far “managed to somehow” reconcile two apparently contrasting goals: 1) thinning/hollowing out pre-existing national polities without disrupting them, 2) consolidating the wider ‘host’ polity (the EU, precisely) and safeguarding its overall durability.

The lesson seems clear: the experimental building of the EU can advance only to the extent that it does not undermine multi-level polity maintenance (i.e. the maintenance of both domestic polities and the EU polity as a whole). This exercise is experimental not only because it requires inventiveness and discovery, but also because it remains constantly sensitive to unexpected events, miscalculations and unintended effects, amplifying uncertainty. In perforating and re-moulding the hard shell of member stateness, the EU has to follow the winding route of political and institutional ‘ice-breaking’, faced with contingent risks of failure – but also with opportunities of success and even occasional serendipity. To return to our initial question, this is the overarching mechanism which accounts for both crisis-proneness and resilience.

How has this mechanism operated during the Covid-19 crisis? The pandemic re-opened – with a vengeance – the foundational controversy over ‘who owes what to whom’ when members states are hit by severe adversities. The divisive imagery of saints and sinners, good and bad pupils which had plagued the Euro-crisis reappeared in Europe’s public sphere, often formulated in the crude language of the early 2010s. In March 2020, the specter of a new existential crisis made a second sinister appearance. This time around, however, worried about the specter and building on past experiences, some EU leaders (in particular Von der Leyen, Macron and Merkel) engaged in a deliberate strategy of multi-level polity maintenance. First, the rules of the *Stability and Growth Pact* and on state aids were suspended and the ECB guaranteed its quantitative easing, thus creating immediate room for adequate fiscal responses, also on the side of the most indebted member states. National polities were thus ‘rescued’ from the risk of functional and possibly political collapse. Behind the scenes, technical negotiations started in their turn to search for acceptable common solutions to the emergency, capable of safeguarding the EU polity as such. Principled disagreements and policy disputes did not subside, but leaders started to converge towards the basic logic of the *NextGenerationEU* plan outlined by the Commission, i.e. that of addressing the crisis by “walking the road together”, without “leaving countries, people and regions behind”.

The maintenance of the EU polity required a two pronged strategy. The first prong was the construction of an ambitious experiment of cross-national solidarity – the NGEU plan – through a package of initiatives for the recovery and resilience of the member states – a package including also non-repayable grants to the economically more fragile ones. The second prong was a communicative campaign aimed at bolstering a sense of community among domestic publics, especially those of “core” member states. Germany was the main protagonist of the strategy. After decades of absolute opposition to any form of debt mutualisation and transnational transfers, this country not only accepted, but resolutely promoted the activation of the most morally demanding type of solidarity for a compound polity, implicitly based on the principle: to each constituent unit according to its fiscal capacity, to each according to its fiscal needs (for investments and reforms).

The communicative efforts made to (re)build the EU's solidaristic ethos deserve particular attention: never before had so much commitment been directed towards EU community building. *Gemeinsamkeit* is a precious system good, which territorial authorities mainly produce through symbolic actions, with a view to infusing value in common belongingness. Togetherness must be discursively constructed, addressing different publics: political and social élites – especially the media – ordinary voters – “the people” – international observers, the markets and so on. Leaders must engage in a communicative discourse aimed at generating sympathy and affection towards the community as such, by stressing (dramatizing, even) the seriousness of the crisis, evoking symbols of togetherness and solidarity and underlying the latter's key role for overcoming the crisis and defeating the polity's alleged enemies.

While she was not the only leader engaged in the symbolic valorization of the EU as community, Merkel did play the decisive role. The sequence of speeches pronounced by the Chancellor between April and July 2020 reveals all the typical traits of community-oriented communication. At the beginning of the crisis, Merkel used mainly a 'public health' frame (the crisis as pandemic) and an 'economic frame' (the crisis as a huge threat of recession). With the intensification of inter-state conflict, she switched however to a 'political-ethical frame' (the crisis as a polity challenge), pinpointing the EU political enemies: “the anti-democratic forces, the radical, authoritarian movements, [who] are just waiting for economic crises to be politically abused”. And, more importantly, she emphasized that the challenge could only be overcome through joint action: “We must make bold proposals, otherwise we just let things happen... Europe must act together, the nation state alone has no future”. Acting together meant to revive and bolster the spirit of solidarity: “I am convinced that the social dimension is just as decisive as the economic one. A socially and economically just Europe is crucial for democratic cohesion. It is the best way to counter all those who seek to weaken our democracies and question all that binds us together”.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the German shift, we must interpret it on the backdrop of two factors: 1) the rise of the so-called constraining dissensus about integration on the side of public opinion (including in Germany) and the ensuing difficulties that domestic leaders encountered in promoting EU building without jeopardizing

their domestic support and risking dangerous forms of politicization; the self-inflicted, antisolidaristic ‘rhetorical trap’ built over the years by Germany’s ordoliberal intelligentsia. After all the Covid-19 crisis affected directly the situation of German voters and their economic interests: why transfer resources to other member states? Angela Merkel was well aware of such obstacles and made a systematic endeavor to reconcile at the symbolic level the logic of EU building with the logic of national interest. This was achieved mainly by using an ethical-political rationale, according to which supporting Europe and promoting its integration was in the interest of the German state and even represented its historical ‘destiny’. In the speech delivered at the Bundestag on 23 April 2020, the Chancellor explicitly raised the question of Germany’s role in Europe: “The commitment to European unification has become an integral part of national ‘reason of state’ [...] The European Union is a community of destiny [...] At this juncture, Europe is not Europe if it does not stand alongside each country, starting with the most indebted ones. What is good for Europe is always very important for Germany”.

With her communicative discourse during the Covid-19 crisis, Merkel not only revived the backbone of German policy (the Europeanization of Germany) which she had allegedly broken ten years earlier, but also redefined it as, no less, as a matter of ‘fate’, resting on explicit normative commitments and historical justifications. One must also consider that Merkel chose a very difficult type of political investment: an investment in solidarity, even involving a sacrifice of German money, on one hand, and “giving something for nothing” (the NGEU grants) on the other. It is more than plausible to interpret developments during 2020 non only as a short-term, pandemic-specific type of policy experimentalism, but as the result of longer term process of polity maintenance learning through operational conditioning. In other words, the main actors (Germany most prominently) were able and willing of reflexively building on previous failures at the polity level and therefore calibrating their choices based on the ‘meta-goal’ of holding the polity together.

Liberal and democratic polities thrive on policy conflicts driven by material and ideal interests. But they break apart without a constant gardening of their ‘bounding’, ‘binding’ and ‘bonding’ foundations, with a view to reconciling opening with closure, conflicts with togetherness, authority with loyalty, competition with solidarity. Navigating as it does

along, rather than across, the Rubicon, the construction and maintenance of the EU polity is particularly demanding. EU leaders must operate as constant gardeners of a double stability: that of the member states and that of the Union as a hosting polity and ‘holding environment’. Crises open up the margins of the possible, but the latter can be a blessing as much as a curse. The relative balance between the two (curse and blessing) is shaped by a complex set of factors. But a Weberian metaphor comes to mind: that political leaders as “ferryman” between the realm of the possible (*Möglich*) and the realm of the actual (*Wirklich*). For this operation to positively impact on human life chances, the ferryman must have “long gaze and a responsible heart”. Such political virtues are especially important for Europe and its future. The pandemic is not over yet, climate change jeopardizes the planet’s survival, the Ukrainian war raises unprecedented security threats. The waters of the Rubicon are getting increasingly rough: can we trust the gaze and hearts of Europe’s current ferryman?

In *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism*¹, Raphael Cohen-Almagor manages to deliver a new take on a widely debated topic, such as multiculturalism, while remaining within the framework of political liberalism (Cohen-Almagor 2021) The book examines whether multiculturalism and liberalism are ultimately reconcilable and what are the limits of state intervention in the affairs of illiberal minorities within democratic societies (4). Therefore, it combines an analytical theoretical approach with a vast array of examples and case studies. Genital cutting, forced marriages, discriminatory norms of divorce and property rights, cultural specific paths of education and veiling bans are only some of the practices discussed by the author.

Cohen-Almagor's core argument recites that nothing is inherently wrong with multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is not necessarily bad for feminism, liberal democracy and national security, as contended by its detractors. (12) On the contrary, multicultural policies, in the shape of group rights, can be used to enhance human flourishing, on the proviso of being balanced with individual rights. This can be achieved by mechanisms of deliberative democracy, reasonable compromise and justified state coercion. Justification for state interference is provided only when cultural norms cause harm to others – especially the most vulnerable members of a minority, the so-called ‘minorities within minorities’ - or do not accord to people equal respect as human beings (13).

¹ *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism Liberalism, Culture and Coercion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

The argument per se appears as a traditional liberal response to the problem of accommodating cultural differences in liberal democracies. Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Will Kymlicka lay in the background as fundamental references. Cohen-Almagor succeeds in reinvigorating the liberal perspective, presenting a normative framework to deal with diversity that holds together the various contributions of these thinkers. However, as I shall argue, this systematizing zeal towards liberal theory sometimes risks missing a challenge that liberalism itself is called to address, *vis-à-vis* cultural norms, namely the problem of the internalization of oppressive cultural norms.

The book is structured into four sections (13). The first one (chapters 1-4) lays out the tenets of what Cohen-Almagor defines as just, reasonable multiculturalism. Each chapter corresponds to a layer of his analytical and comprehensive theory: 1) liberal justice, 2) reasonableness, 3) compromise and deliberative democracy, 4) justified coercion (13-14). In the following three sections, he shows how the theoretical principles articulated in the first part of the book can be applied to contemporary contentious cases (14).

At first, I shall illustrate in more detail the content of the first four chapters, which constitute the theoretical bedrock of the book. The cases to which Cohen-Almagor applies his theory will be more extensively examined when taking into consideration the issues that *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism* leaves unsettled.

The first chapter deals with the concept of justice, mostly relying on John Rawls' political liberalism, thus presenting the theoretical device of the veil of ignorance and the argument of overlapping consensus as essential to overcoming the difficulties of deep disagreement among different conceptions of the good (28-34). These two fundamental features of Rawls' political theory are coupled with the Kantian tenet of respecting other people and Mill's harm principle. Cohen-Almagor contends that Kantian mutual respect supplemented by the requirement of not harming others means that persons should be always respected qua persons and someone's freedom should be restricted only in case it prejudices someone else's liberty (34-39). Therefore, democratic governments are called to provide opportunities for their citizens to flourish as persons and cultivate their freedom while ensuring, at the same time, law and order. Unrestricted freedom might in fact destroy

the whole political system. This is what the author calls ‘the democratic catch’, namely the fact that liberal values need to be carefully balanced, otherwise they risk endangering the very functioning of the democracy (39-44).

The second chapter develops the concept of reasonableness, which is said to bridge the notions of liberal justice, outlined in the previous chapter, and multiculturalism (4). It is argued that reasonableness sets the boundaries of cultural accommodation within just liberal institutions (46). The extent of reasonableness varies according to the degree of acceptance of the liberal values underpinning democratic institutions (49). Consequently, the claims of cultural minorities are deemed more or less reasonable based on their adherence to the harm principle and mutual respect (49). Moreover, relying on Will Kymlicka taxonomy of ethnocultural diversity and group rights, Cohen-Almagor discusses the distinction between multination and polyethnic states, as well as the distinction between internal restrictions and external protections, agreeing with Kymlicka on ruling out internal restrictions as being incompatible with liberal values (54-65).

The notions of compromise and deliberative democracy are addressed in the third chapter. Compromise is seen as inherently linked to the notion of reasonableness since it is argued that a fair compromise can be reached only when the involved parties are prone to make mutual reasonable concessions (72). This is what distinguishes a tactical compromise from a principled one. While a tactical compromise is temporary and lacks in mutuality because there is no genuine desire to make some concessions to the other but only to postpone confrontation, principled compromise entails that the two parties meet halfway and reach a shared agreement that leaves both satisfied to some extent (79-82). A principled compromise between groups can be obtained through the process of authentic democratic deliberation (72-76). Cohen-Almagor builds on discourse ethics to defend this idea of deliberative democracy as the best approach to resolve and mediate conflicts between minorities and institutions (82-85). He argues that deliberative democracy entails the right to be different and, at the same time, demands to solve the conflicts that these differences might generate by way of public discussion (83). To enter the public discussion, citizens from different cultural communities have to accept that, despite their differences, they share common interests as members of the same polity (83). These shared

interests provide the necessary basis for principled compromise. Moreover, public engagement ensures the legitimacy of the outcomes of deliberation (85).

When compromise seems hard to reach or it is broken down, one of the parties involved might decide to resort to coercion (87). Consequently, the fourth chapter distinguishes between coercion and brute forms of oppression and illustrates the various shapes that coercion can take: circumstantial or person-based; benevolent or malevolent; paternalistic, self or other-regarding; internalised or designated; enacted by a minority or a majority (88-108). Coercion represents an infringement of someone's freedom, therefore it should be the last resort in the context of liberal democracy (90). It needs to be justified by verifying that the motives behind it are just and reasonable (89-90). The terms of justice and reasonableness are once again those defined in the previous chapters, exemplified by the principles of not harming others and mutual respect (46-50).

Once outlined the theoretical framework of his just reasonable multiculturalism, in the second and third sections of the book, Cohen-Almagor proceeds in applying his theory to controversial cases of state interference in cultural minorities' affairs. Section two (chapters 5-6) examines the cases in which minority groups inflict physical harm on their members, focusing in particular on the practices of scarring, cultural defence for honour killings, suttee, female and male circumcision and female genital mutilation (FGM) (112-175). Except for circumcision and self-inflicted scars, it is argued that these practices are beyond state tolerance because they are incompatible with basic liberal principles. They involve brute forms of discrimination towards women and torture (144-145). Especially, FGM is deemed unacceptable even when the women involved endorse the practice. However, it is also suggested that an alternative symbolic rite that does not involve permanent damage could be accepted as a form of just reasonable compromise (145).

In section three (chapters 7-8), Cohen-Almagor analyses the cases in which the harm inflicted is non-physical, yet constitutes a denial of basic human rights, especially to women and children. Here he reflects on sexist cultural norms, considering the discriminatory membership assignment system of the Pueblo Indian Communities, arranged and forced marriages for girls, sexism in Judaism, the infringement of the freedom of

exit from one's community, especially examining the case of the Hutterite Church, and the denial of appropriate education to children in Amish communities (179-233). He contends that liberal values require the state to equally respect its citizens as ends in themselves, regardless of their gender. Therefore, women have the right to develop themselves as they wish, exactly as men do. The state must ensure this right, intervening when communities blatantly prevent them to realize themselves as they seek (203-204). The same argument is applied to children's education. Education is seen as a fundamental tool for self-development, hence its impairment amounts to hindering the children's future flourishing and their ability to leave their community if so they wish (228-233).

Finally, the last section (chapters 9-10) discusses the policies adopted in France and Israel to deal with Muslim and Arab minorities, which are perceived as threats to national identity and security. The ninth chapter harshly criticizes the French ban on veiling. It is argued that such a ban reflects a perfectionist conception of secularism, typical of French republicanism, which conflicts with a version of liberalism that appreciates diversity and pluralism (274-276). The last chapter analyses the Jewish-Arab relationship in Israel, described as solely dominated by security considerations, which ends up systematically disadvantaging the Arab minority (284). As in the case of France, Cohen-Almagor argues that a perfectionist conception of the state, which in this case elevates Jewishness above the correct functioning of liberal institutions, impairs the equal enjoyment of rights and liberties of the Muslim and Arab minorities (304).

While I find most of Cohen-Almagor's theory effective and very well-argued – thanks to a remarkably clear and didactic writing style –, I would like to focus on one element of his theory that may deserve further discussion: internalized coercion.

The concept of internalized coercion is introduced in the fourth chapter and re-examined in the fifth when the practices of FGM and genital circumcision are examined. Sometimes Cohen-Almagor seems to overlook the extent to which this subtle form of coercion can be detrimental to the members of certain minorities – especially to women, when the norms of their community legitimize sexist discrimination. The acknowledgement of the effects of internalized coercion also calls into question the notion of state neutrality towards self-regarding choices, a staple of

liberal theory. Cohen-Almagor recommends great caution, but overall he does not take a resolute stand on the matter. This is surprising considering that much of the contemporary debate on multiculturalism is crippled by the dilemma of either justifying state intervention, against the will of the people that this intervention is supposed to safeguard, or tolerating discriminatory cultural norms for the sake of state neutrality towards people's choices (Chambers 2007; Phillips 2010; Khader 2011).

Despite a few hints towards the discussion on state neutrality and 'women's liberation' in his critique of French republicanism, his takes on the veil ban or voluntary FGM are not linked to a broader perspective on the subject of gender injustice. (274) On the contrary, in his case by case analysis, it is hard to envision a coherent approach. Sometimes he seems ready to defend interventionism to safeguard gender equality, as in the case of FGM (127-139) or basic human rights violations (184-190), some others, he defends the legitimacy of cultural manipulation over women (102-104) or scarring for beauty (117-119), without even considering the connections between the examined phenomena.

Consequently, in the following paragraphs, I shall discuss the shortcomings of a theory of just, reasonable multiculturalism that does not face up to the problem of the internalization of gender unjust cultural norms. I shall first outline the distinction between internalized, designated and self-coercion, showing some inconsistencies in its formulation. Afterwards, I shall demonstrate how Cohen-Almagor's arguments against FGM and suttee do not hold the ground without a proper account of internalized coercion. In the end, I shall briefly discuss the challenge that these considerations pose to the notion of liberal neutrality.

Cohen-Almagor describes internalized coercion as the following: when a subject internalizes certain self-limiting beliefs related to their culture, they may abide by them, without even realizing that they are forgoing something to tradition or the community they belong to (102 -103). This form of coercion is internalized because there are no explicit external constraints to comply with cultural norms. Therefore, the subject willingly accepts the oppressive conditions to which they are subjected, without perceiving them as coercive.

He also distinguishes between internalized coercion, designated coercion and self-coercion. Internalized coercion may imply some forms of manipulation, but, as already said, it does not involve external con-

straints and is directed toward an entire cultural group, e.g. women. On the contrary, designated coercion implies personally exerting pressure on non-complaint individuals, even by threats, to bring them back into the community (103-104). Self-coercion constitutes, instead, a broader concept, as it refers to the general possibility for the individual to dispose of their freedom as they wish, even as a commodity (99-102).

On the one hand, Cohen-Almagor argues that designated coercion is clearly unjustified because it consists in denying people their freedom of exit from their community, thus, state interference against it is warranted (104). On the other, it appears that a case for or against self-coercion and internalized coercion is harder to make because it is difficult to assess the scope of one's autonomy, even in absence of formal external constraints.

As concerns self-coercion, once again he grounds his response on Mill and Kant. Building on Kantian ethics, he argues that the boundaries for one's freedom are set by the respect for people as ends (99-100). This seems to entail not only the principle of mutual respect, already outlined in the first chapter, but also a form of self-respect. People cannot dispose of themselves as mere objects, entirely waving out their freedom, because this is so degrading that they would stop being moral agents (99). Consequently, contracts of voluntary servitude are unacceptable. In addition, referring to Mill, Cohen-Almagor seems to suggest that those who wish to become slaves should be deemed irrational because they do not realize the absolute implications of a similar choice (100). Therefore, state intervention may not only be legitimate but actually required to protect these people from their poor capacities of judgment (101-102).

However, there are different degrees of self-coercion. Voluntary servitude is arguably the most extreme. Cohen-Almagor also mentions fasting as a bland and admissible form of self-restraint (104) and suicide as a more contentious one, which is nonetheless permissible in a liberal state (101-102). These practices – suicide and self-harm in general – should be tolerated because they are self-regarding. They do not cause harm to others, thus falling outside the scope of state intervention. Unlike the case of the voluntary slave, the suicidal or the individual with self-harming behaviour are not necessarily deemed irrational. On the contrary, assuming that people are capable of reason and act in their best interest, they are considered the best judges for their own affairs, even if their choices

may look bizarre or incomprehensible to someone else (101). Therefore, Cohen-Almagor contends that “people who are prima facie reasonable may commit suicide if they so wish...” and adds that “autonomy and liberty are that important in the liberal thinking that they enable people to put an end to their autonomy and liberty” (102)². Only when people are clearly incapable of reasoning – because they are delirious or have not developed yet this capacity, as in the case of children – the state is legitimate to intervene to safeguard them (101).

Self-coercion is directly linked to internalized coercion. They both involve self-restraint but the difference between them seems to reside in the fact that the former is autonomously enacted by the subject, while the second is the result of influence and manipulation from the subject’s group.³ As long as this manipulation does not involve physical harm or does not resort to personal threats, thus shifting to designated coercion, Cohen-Almagor is wary of state interference (103). For instance, he argues that those subjected to internalized coercion may either accept the justification provided by their community for this treatment – such as the fact that it is necessary to preserve traditions or for the community’s survival – or wholeheartedly endorse the values that ground these restrictions, without even perceiving them as oppressive (102). If this is the case, then attempts to interfere may actually result in illegitimate acts of cultural imperialism (103).

I believe that this distinction is built on conceptual premises that prevent from criticizing adequately the dynamics that it is supposed to categorize. First, it is not clear what is the point of differentiating between ‘internalized coercion’ and ‘self-coercion’ when the victim of internalized coercion allegedly endorses the values underpinning the restrictions and this is held as a sufficient justification for tolerating systematic in-

² Cohen-Almagor argues that people are free to put an end to their liberty, but not to use it as a commodity, otherwise this would fall in the case of voluntary servitude. The difference between the two cases is subtle and the aspect of commodification seems to play an important role, however, it is not further specified.

³ It could also be argued that self-coercion is always ultimately linked to a form of internalized coercion, resulting from manipulation or a distorted perspective on reality, but this goes beyond the scope of the review.

equalities. Manipulation and group pressure, which are the most salient aspects of internalized coercion, do not seem to play a sufficient role in further investigating the motives behind this endorsement. Why does Cohen-Almagor introduce a third type of coercion if it is not intended to solicit a reaction from the state, not even in the shape of a plea for deeper scrutiny?

Moreover, in the case of self-coercion, he argues that state interference is legitimate if the subject's judgement is evidently impaired. A whole body of feminist literature has questioned the legitimacy of choices resulting from internalized coercion on the exact same ground, contending that internalized coercion can lead to an impairment of the deliberative capacities of the coerced people. One of the most debated questions in feminist literature is exactly why women are often complicit with their subordination (Jaggar 1983). So far the primary explanation for this phenomenon has been articulated in terms of adaptive preferences. (Khader 2012).

Since the 1990's many formulations of adaptive preferences have been proposed. Some scholars conceive of them as unconscious adaptations (Elster 1983), or a form of life-long habituation to oppression (Bartky 1990, Meyers 2002; Nussbaum 2001), some others focus on the fact that they may even be rational adaptation yet distorted by the oppressive context in which they take place (Cudd 2014; Khader 2011). However, all these different accounts agree on the fact that the subject's endorsement of sexist and discriminatory norms does not necessarily legitimate these norms.

The notion of internalized coercion reappears in chapter five. Here Cohen-Almagor condemns FGM arguing that it is a discriminatory practice amounting to torture, even when women accept it as a part of their culture (145). In this case, he shows that internalized coercion is combined with a serious and irreversible form of physical harm, thus going beyond the scope of tolerance in a liberal democracy.

Nonetheless, if such a serious and irreversible form of physical harm is considered 'voluntarily self-inflicted' because internalized coercion alone is not sufficient to delegitimize women's complacency with it, why should it be outlawed by the liberal state? If voluntary, FGM do not violate the two terms of reasonableness, the principle of not harming others and that of mutual respect. Besides, as concerns the more undetermined principle of self-respect, only briefly mentioned in chapter

four, this does not seem to apply to self-harm, but only to servitude. It seems hard to make a case against FGM, solely based on the core tenets of just reasonable multiculturalism. What is missing in the justification for state intervention against FGM is exactly a more extensive analysis of the mechanisms behind internalized coercion.⁴

The same argument applies to the case that Cohen-Almagor builds against *suttee*, namely the immolation of a wife following her husband's death.⁵ When examining the legitimacy of the practice, he is the first to acknowledge that if the woman gave her consent to death, it is obviously because her free will has been compromised by the community coercive expectations according to which the fate of women's is inherently linked to that of their husbands. Once again, what seems to be crucial in justifying a prohibition of this practice is the fact that a self-regarding harmful choice has a socially constructed nature. Harm alone, as severe as it can be, does not constitute a sufficient warranty for liberal state intervention, not if at the same time suicide or scarring are deemed acceptable. The difference between *suttee* and suicide stands in the patriarchal meaning encoded in the former, but this cannot be adequately thematised without a proper account of internalized coercion.

Such account is ever more needed to wholly redefine the notion of liberal neutrality in current multicultural liberal democracy, which is presented as one of the main objectives of *Just, Reasonable, Multiculturalism*. (4) It is argued that the liberal state refrains from promoting a single conception of the good and lets its citizens cultivate their own, as they see appropriate. (6) However, the internalization of gender unjust social norms may call into question the legitimacy of certain practices, even if

⁴ For a more extensive discussion of the limits of liberalism in dealing with internalized oppressive norms and physical harm see Chambers 2007.

⁵ *Suttee* is different from dowry murders, a phenomenon extensively analysed by Uma Narayan (1997) and wrongly associated with the idea of 'Indiannes'. In her paper Narayan warns against a typical ethnocentric point of view which essentializes non-western cultures, presenting them as the main culprit of the cross-cultural problem of gender injustice. I believe that taking into account the pervasiveness of internalized coercion goes into the direction of de-essentializing cultures, as it focuses on manipulation and the asymmetries of powers within all groups, as they are, instead of exoticizing their nature.

self-regarding and endorsed by those who engage in them. Cohen-Almagor seems to partially acknowledge this in certain cases, the banning of FGM and suttee are some examples, but overall it is not clear what role internalized coercion plays in his theory. If it has one – and I argue that it should, because otherwise certain policies defended in the book could not be justified – then it must be also put into dialogue with the problem, only rapidly touched in chapter nine, of not escalating into perfectionism. Taking seriously the effects of internalized coercion should not end up “forcing people to be free”, as in the French headscarf affair (275). On the one hand, the liberal state risks acquiescing gender injustice, on the other, enforcing cultural imperialism. The role of just, reasonable multiculturalism is to find a balance between the two.

Finally, I would like to highlight a major strength of Cohen-Almagor’s book. A critique often moved to liberal multiculturalism is that it remains primarily a theoretical project that leaves poor guidance on the concrete allocation of culturally differentiated rights. For instance, Annamari Vitikainen argues that there is often a gap between the ideal territory, where liberals discuss the rationale of state cultural accommodation or the compatibility of these measures with liberalism, and the more concrete political arena that demands practical and effective state policies (Vitikainen 2015, 5-6). Even though liberal multiculturalists have provided persuasive responses to the first two challenges, the scope of their arguments rarely extends to the questions of state policies. On the contrary, in *Just, Reasonable Multiculturalism* both territories – the ideal and non-ideal – are widely explored. Justification of group rights is always combined with the problem of identifying the proper modes of allocation of these rights in concrete and often controversial situations. For sure, this is one of the main reasons to appreciate this book.

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