Book Review

Myrto Tsakatika (2008)
Political Responsibility and the European Union
Manchester: Manchester University Press

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The European Union's (EU) democratic deficit has been a prominent issue of political and scholarly debate for some decades. This widespread attention has resulted in evermore detailed accounts of its causes, features and potential solutions. Myrto Tsakatika's *Political Responsibility and the European Union* is a recent contribution to this debate. Tsakatika argues that the Union's present *responsibility* deficit – in her view a core element of the wider democratic deficit – can be explained by looking at the way in which ideas, norms and values have developed within the EU. In this respect, Jean Monnet's conception of technocratic European governance has been influential throughout the course of European integration and partly explains current problems. Based on the ideas of the Scottish communitarian theorist Alasdair MacIntyre, Tsakatika argues that Europe's responsibility deficit is the result of a lack of a sense of moral community and of shortcomings in the institutional requirements for responsible governance. According to Tsakatika, governance is a practice which, like any other practice, has its own internal goods, namely predictability, order and stability. A sense of moral community is required for people to accept and evaluate governance practices. She argues that moral communities are not fixed and do not require a pre-existing sense of community. They can evolve over time, exist at different levels and to different degrees. They may interact with each other, the result of which may bring change. A European sense of community could therefore also evolve, be it as the result of a bottom-up process nourished by smaller communities. In this respect, Tsakatika refers to, for example, the increased emphasis on transparency, influenced by the Scandinavian countries, and the evolvement of stronger environmental norms, mostly inspired by Northern European countries. By developing such a constructivist approach towards community, she avoids one of the main criticisms of communitarianism, namely that it tends to be conservative by emphasising existing arrangements.

Because Tsakatika believes a European sense of community is still in the making, whereas institutional changes are constantly discussed, the main focus of her book is on the institutional requirements for legitimate European governance. One of the main conceptions of legitimate governance is that it should be responsible. A responsible actor should be reliable, trustworthy, consistent and prudent, but to act responsibly the right institutional requirements should be in place. According to Tsakatika, these are accountability, identifiability and openness. Accountability refers to the need for clear 'checks' on single institutional acts and the importance of 'forum', meaning the prospect of public scrutiny of actors' overall performance, which is crucial for setting the standards for political conduct and for rewarding or punishing actors. Identifiability is concerned with the ability to determine who should be praised or criticised for policy outcomes (sometimes we will not be able to

exactly pinpoint who was responsible, so we act as if someone can be held responsible, which those involved accept). Openness refers to the availability of information and the need for an open conduct of governance. Secrecy may be defensible in cases where openness would impinge on political judgement or endanger the operation of the system of governance and the existence of the political community. Yet in such cases any decision should be based on the judgement of citizens.

Tsakatika correctly states that the EU system of governance shows important limitations regarding all three aforementioned requirements. It is characterised by horizontal and vertical complexity, networks and bargaining behind closed doors. The current system of checks within the EU is quite dense and the technical nature of many issues and the various complex decision-making procedures still conceal much of what is going on. These trademarks, Tsakatika argues, can be traced back to the views propagated by Jean Monnet. Monnet wanted to avoid political squabbling and opted for technocratic governance as a legitimate means to yield efficient, independently formulated policies based on expertise and merits.

Identifiability and forum are the most problematic aspects of European governance. It is often difficult to determine who is involved in policy-making and how. Furthermore, actors do not always accept responsibility for their functioning at the European level. The European forum is weakly developed and lacks common standards and intermediate structures. National forums do not represent a solution as they are bound by national perspectives, which is problematic in terms of European issues. According to Tsakatika, the result of recent treaty changes has been mixed in terms of improving this situation. While on the one hand attempts have been made to simplify procedures, clarify competences and improve checks, novelties such as a semi-permanent European Council President and a double-hatted High Representative will increase complexity.

While Tsakatika's assessment of the problems of European governance is quite accurate, there are a few shortcomings that should be mentioned. For one, the reader never gets a proper insight into what a European moral community might look like. The aforementioned references to transparency and environmental norms only paint an incomplete picture and although the institutional requirements outlined above can apparently help to stimulate the advance of such a community, it remains unclear to what extent. Furthermore, more examples from the practice of European governance rather than the process of treaty revision might have better illustrated the challenges facing the EU and the possible options for dealing with them. Also, it does not become clear how trade-offs between the different conceptions of legitimate governance come about. For example, how does an increase in responsibility – and, in essence, more citizen involvement – correspond to efficiency?

Overall, *Political Responsibility and the European Union* presents the reader with a new and essentially interesting analysis of part of the Union's democratic deficit. One drawback is that it is packed with various concepts and ideas which sometimes reduce the readability of the text. The book may be aimed at 'specialists and postgraduate students', but they too may lose track of the argument now and then. On the other hand, chapters three to five present an overview of some of the main obstacles of legitimate European governance and of the attempts to overcome them which is accessible to a much wider audience. All in all, Tsakatika shows that the important debate about the EU's democratic credentials is still very much alive and continues to deserve the attention of scholars and politicians alike.

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