


BOOK REVIEW

Mamma Europa. Una nuova unione dopo crisi e scandali

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Andrea Volpe 

Department of Political Sciences, Sapienza Università di Roma, Rome, Italy
Corresponding author. Email: volpeandrea3@gmail.com

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The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the most disruptive events of recent times and its impact has been significant across the world, including in European countries. In the latter, the pandemic generated relevant changes in the social and political culture of Europe, leading the EU to embrace new strategies, paradigms and courses of action.

Unfortunately, the literature dedicated to the more recent developments of European integration could not sufficiently address the challenges related to such an unexpected event. The effects of the pandemic on the evolution of the integration process have often been analysed isolating single cases or subjects from the broader context of this topic, without seizing the complexity of these phenomena. This makes the audience unaware of the magnitude of the recent dynamics underpinning the evolution of the EU.

Elisabetta Gualmini has provided the audience with a big picture of the latest developments of the EU through the publication of a volume entitled ‘Mamma Europa. Una nuova unione dopo crisi e scandali’.

The multidisciplinary approach adopted by the author is what distinguishes this work from the existing literature. Gualmini, starting from a brief historical analysis of the main guidelines that have characterised the integration process since its early stages, scrutinises the recent developments of the EU combining elements belonging to various disciplines, including sociology, economics and political science. The argument put forward by Gualmini is that the pandemic has generated a clear departure of the EU from its original precepts, which were mainly based on market integration regulated by a rigidly conservative logic and devoid of solid social grounding; the dramatic social impact of the pandemic made the conservative approach to integration largely unpopular, leading the EU to provide the European project with a new social architecture (p. 13). The EU placed citizens’ social protection at the top of its agenda, determining a paradigmatic shift from a conservative to a New Keynesian approach to economy.

The five chapters of the book can be divided into three parts. In the first (Ch. 1), the author tries to identify the causes of the Euroscepticism that has invested the EU over the last decade. While most of the literature focuses on political and cultural factors, as the ideological rejection of cosmopolitanism and the idea of transnational governance, Gualmini considers the economic factor as crucial. The European sovereign debt crisis showed the preference of the EU for rigid programmes of austerity that made the quick restoration of the public finances a priority, heedless of the negative social effects on many people. The cases of Greece and Italy, two countries that were forced to adopt very restrictive fiscal policies in order to improve their financial stability have been emblematic of a conservatism that paid little attention to the needs of the citizens

(p. 35). The growing dissent towards this approach reached its peak in the initial phase of the pandemic crisis, convincing the EU to a radical policy change.

In the second part (Ch. 2–4), the author describes the paradigmatic shift that led the EU to set aside the historical trademark of economic conservatism, providing the European project with a new social dimension (p.63). At the beginning of the pandemic, European public opinion strongly demanded the EU to ensure measures of social protection for the citizens. The response of the EU was characterised by an unprecedented effort in the social sphere. The first measure was the suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact: the EU member states were allowed to freely increase their public spending in order to alleviate the social effects of the crisis. The consequent rise of the sovereign debts was guaranteed by the European Central Bank, which sustained these debts through unprecedented, expansive monetary policies. Then, the core of the social action of the EU was the Recovery Plan, a programme of loans and non-repayable grants aimed at making Europe a fair and equitable society. The Recovery Plan would be financed through the emission of Eurobonds, whose introduction has increased the principle of solidarity in Europe. The unparalleled amount of aid that the EU has provided to its member states, encouraging them to adopt expansive fiscal policies in order to exit the hardest phase of the pandemic, has paved the way for enhancing the social legislation of the EU. In fact, new measures to tackle unemployment, introduce a European minimum wage and protect the workers of the so-called ‘gig economy’ have been put in place, alongside significant programmes such as ‘Child Guarantee’ and ‘Youth Guarantee’ that aim to provide young Europeans with decent standards of living (p. 111). Lastly, the relevance of the new paradigms of solidarity and social protection has been apparent on the occasion of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The EU was swift in welcoming millions of war refugees, providing them with a temporary visa. Thus, refugees have been guaranteed access to social services and labour markets across the EU.

In the final part (Ch. 5), Gualmini makes her position clear: she considers the numerous social measures recently undertaken by the EU as the foundations of a new ‘European social model’, based on a New Keynesian approach to the economy and a common effort for the convergence of national welfare states. The solidity of these foundations is guaranteed by the broad consensus that the social legislation enjoys by the European Parliament, namely the body that directly represents the interests of the European voters. According to Gualmini, social issues have become cross-sectional in the European society, permeating the vast majority of European public opinion.

The position expressed by the author seems worthy of support. Despite conservative economic stances have not been completely sidelined, as the influence of the so-called ‘frugal countries’ remains not negligible, the vast consensus around the new social identity of the EU is tangible, as further demonstrated by the outcomes of the ‘Conference on the future of Europe’, an important project of deliberative democracy recently experimented by the EU; the final report of this project encouraged the EU to continue without hesitation with the social development of the European project, making people’s needs a priority. This is indicated as the best strategy to allow the EU to completely overturn the main factors that had caused the rise of Euroscepticism: the excessive economic conservatism and the little attention paid to the social dimension of the integration process.

Ultimately, Gualmini’s book is highly recommended to academics, students and journalists interested in the dynamics of European integration. The clarity of presentation, impartiality and the author’s ability of deepening complex issues in a very detailed way make the volume one of the most exhaustive and complete works in the field of European integration among similar volumes in Italian language of recent times.