

Introduction

Rosa Maria Fernandez

Department of Economics,
University of Birmingham,
J.G. Smith Building, Edgbaston, B15 2TT, Birmingham, UK
E-mail: R.M.Fernandez@bham.ac.uk

Biographical notes: Rosa Maria Fernandez holds a degree in Economics from the University of Oviedo (Spain) and joined UNED (Spain National Distance Education University) as Lecturer in 2006. She presented her thesis in 2010, entitled 'European Union and climate change. Main economic effects'. Through the last years, she has been a visiting researcher at the University of Exeter (UK) and York University (Toronto). She has published some articles in her main research interests related to climate change, energy policy and corporate social responsibility. She has been an Associate Tutor for the University of Bradford and is currently working for the University of Birmingham teaching environmental economics.

We live in a period of continuous and convulse changes, a time where words like crisis, sovereign debt or deficit have become too familiar for most of the citizens, who do not understand what is going on, or what it is even more striking, why they are asked to sacrifice part of their welfare. It is difficult to accept all of a sudden decisions made by governments in the name of economic recovery, appealing to people's solidarity, in order to comply with rules and requirements fixed outside their frontiers.

The European Union was born with the purpose of improving living conditions for the people within its territory, applying the principle of solidarity among others, and it has been this principle, taken sometimes wrongly, and the accompanying redistribution of resources, what has attracted countries over decades to apply for a membership. And for decades we have witnessed how the EU grew, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but most of the time unevenly. The search for growth has been the baseline for main decisions and measures adopted through every country, and while this growth was actually happening, everything seemed to be right. The availability of resources allowed levels of welfare state unknown before, and there was a general satisfaction feeling because the state was capable to provide services and goods considered essential for everyone. The 20th century, and particularly its second half, has seen how education and health coverage levels increased and were adopted as universal rights. It has also seen how rules were created to guarantee the respect for adequate working conditions, to avoid abuse and discrimination, or to protect those under difficult conditions such as unemployment or disabilities.

States were perceived as providers for the social services that the market was not covering and as the advocates of general acceptable living conditions for all, or even more, as the ones who would try to improve those living conditions, undertaking activities for the protection of the environment, promoting cultural activities or increasing the public services coverage (by building new infrastructures, for instance). It would not

be seen as inadequate then to call this type of state ‘social state’, the state that cares for society, for the citizens, for the people.

What are we facing now instead? Having this perception of the state as the one who takes care of us, when the decrease on economic activity and the market failures have made unemployment levels grow to figures difficult to have forecasted, citizens turn their eyes on their governments waiting for a solution: first, to prevent situations like the current one from happening again; and second, to protect those more severely affected by the adverse conditions.

But the measures taken by governments all over Europe do not seem to have the desired effects. In fact, for a lot of people, as demonstrations in the streets indicate, it is not understandable the fierce defence of banking and financial systems, particularly when at the same time experts seem to claim for a reduction of the public sector, clearly not taking into account the consequences of such a reduction: Having a lower number of doctors or teachers is not only increasing the unemployment levels, it is also reducing the possibilities of having services with the right level of quality, and in some cases making the public service disappear completely. Increasing taxes over food, books, public transport, would directly affect in a more negative way to those with a low level of resources. Reducing the amounts and the periods during which unemployed people can perceive some type of subsidy or economic help may encourage them to search for a job more proactively, but when there are no jobs due to the reduced economic activity it would only contribute to worsen the situation.

These measures are taken under the name of increasing the efficiency of the public sector, but it is dangerous to assume that the public sector is going to be more efficient if what it is really happening is simply that part of the population is left without access to the public sector. When bus or train routes are cancelled, hospitals or schools closed, and citizens are required to travel longer distances to receive those services, this could be translated in some cases into citizens not managing to access the service at all, probably because they do not have the private resources to cover the distance that the public sector is not covering.

Under circumstances like this, it is worthwhile wondering which the role of the state is if when things go wrong it is not capable to keep the level of protection that citizens need. Are states dominated by markets, and if so, should this be the case? Is this really going to be a temporary situation of sacrifices and welfare levels will go back to the ones taken for granted up to now? The crisis appears to be, apart from a challenging situation that will test everyone’s capabilities to overcome negative situations, a good opportunity for reflection and decision making on the type of state we want, and the type of Europe we want. If the principle of solidarity is lost and social rights cannot be maintained when things go wrong, which is the role of Europe? Are there being put at risk the roots of the European Union?

How would it be possible not to understand people protests and confusion? I do, and I hope that Europe will prove to be strong enough to make the necessary changes and adjustments to recover people’s trust and to lead everyone into a, this time, sustainable growth path, which does not leave anyone on the way.

This number of the *International Journal of Human Rights and Constitutional Studies* addresses the issues that the vulnerability of social rights may cause. I am certain it will contribute to the analysis and discussion over the questions I have raised in the preceding paragraphs.