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Politics of Last Resort: Governing by Emergency in the European Union. By Jonathan White, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 240p, \$85.00 cloth.

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In the last ten years the word crisis has become ubiquitous and unavoidable in the scholarship on the European Union (EU). To start, the onset of the Great Recession in the US spawned the crisis of the Eurozone when it moved across the Atlantic in 2010. This economic downturn was followed by the refugee crisis of 2015 and, this year, by the crisis brought about by the onset of the novel Coronavirus. The last decade of the EU can thus indeed be told as a narrative of stumbling from crisis to crisis.

In this book, Jonathan White examines how these events have given rise to a new, transnational form of governing by emergency. Rather than examining the quality of the EU's responses to these events, he is interested in how the "handling of situations as exceptional ones" (4) has resulted in "a shift from 'temporary crisis governance' to 'preparatory emergency management'" (95). These developments are worrying not only because they give rise to a reactive form of politics that denies agency, but also because they depart from fundamental democratic norms and procedures.

The first half of the *Politics of Last Resort* is devoted to developing a theoretical account of this new form emergency politics. Rhetorically the language of crisis helps to push through policies deemed necessary in the face of principled and procedural opposition. Institutionally, White argues that emergency rule is characterized by "a form of heightened executive activity, which in the transnational context involves multiple institutions in a precarious and shape-shifting pattern of coordination" (109).

In drawing this conclusion, White builds primarily on the example of the Troika, a loose alliance of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although it has no official status in European law or the treaties that define the constitutional infrastructure of the EU, this loose, shape-shifting configuration of technocratic actors was able to dictate domestic fiscal and welfare policy to Greece and other crisis-ridden member-states. Operating as a black box, the Troika avoided accountability by sidelining existing bureaucracies, using conditional loans to enforce deep cuts in public expenditure.

Whereas political exceptionalism is usually associated with state sovereignty, at the level of the EU these developments present a new form of “emergency rule without a defined institutional sovereign – a dispersed emergency regime rather than a clearly authored state of exception” (34). Combined with the fact that the transnational politics of last resort responds to the imperatives of large, supposedly irresistible socio-economic forces, it also represents a profound disavowal of agency. White therefore argues that “the practices of emergency rule invite their mirror opposite: a politics defined by its rejection of necessity and the celebration of volition” (145). This is his explanation for the rise of populism on the continent.

This is, in many ways, a brilliant and timely book. However, it leaves a number of key questions unanswered. Two in particular stand out. The first regards the ontological status of the extreme circumstances to which the logic of emergency is applied. In the opening pages of the book, White writes of how emergency rule “is framed as a response to...[q]uasi-natural forces of the socio-economic sphere” (2) that allows for “the handling of situations as exceptional ones demanding actions of last resort” (4). However, he later admits that “material constraints on political authority” (127) exist as well.

If we want to understand emergency politics, it seems as though determining the actual material constraints is not actually “something we may leave to the critical economists and sociologists” (69); instead, insofar as these constraints are real, examining how the “colonization of the lifeworld” by anonymous, international market forces is reshaping political possibilities within the “postnational constellation” (see Jürgen Habermas’s 2001 book under this title, especially chapter 4) should be a core part of EU studies. Additionally, if emergency rule responds to threats that are not merely constructed by the “*spokespeople of the market*” (70), then it may be that such crisis management is justified in certain situations. While I agree that democratic legitimacy depends on preventing the unnecessary overuse of such measures, we also need to think about how to ensure that emergency politics applied with the interests of the many, not the few in mind.

The second major lacuna regards what changes – if any – could be made to the institutional architecture of the EU to combat its slide towards a politics of the exception. Towards the end of the book White suggests that increased partisanship, combined with the periodicity of elections that “intermittently require[e] executive institutions to re-staff themselves” (176), could constrain the executive discretion upon which emergency politics depends. However, as White himself admits, it is unclear if this would help, as the move towards emergency management is a “shift in the ethos of executive power that permeates both state and supra-state institutions” (65).

It is a core contention of this book that the rise of emergency politics “goes hand in hand with their scaling up to the transnational level” (1). For White, this argument follows from the fact that the EU is a “purposive association” designed to prioritize “the market-making process, with its emphasis on the free movement of goods, capital, services, and labour” (47). I have my doubts about this interpretation, given that integration’s primary purpose, at least in the years

immediately following the end of World War II, was to secure peace on the continent through collective oversight of trade in coal and steel. These steps designed to make war “materially impossible” defined the initial function of the first European Communities (see Verovšek, *Memory and the Future of Europe: Rupture and Integration in the Wake of Total War*, 2020). Given that the EU’s neoliberal policy goals were added later, it seems as though the basic purposes of purposive associations are subject to change over time.

The bigger problem is that if we take White’s arguments about the EU and the transnational realm seriously, then it seems as though reform is impossible. This interpretation is validated by White’s contention that greater respect for “fundamental norms of modern politics” (19), especially the equality of states and state sovereignty, could have prevented the rise of emergency politics. This makes it sound as though he sees a return to the nation-state – or at the very least, to a Europe of states – as a possible solution to the politics of last resort. However, at other points in the book he seems to imply that the state is an inadequate refuge from these developments by arguing that a “more integrated transnational executive” that would “be less prone to the politics of emergency” (168).

This book lives up to its billing as piece of conceptual work that links “theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence” (9). Nevertheless, I would have liked to see more concrete, institutional proposals for reforming the EU as well. If we are to push back against the politics of last resort, the question of Europe’s institutional structure and purpose – its *finalité* in the jargon of EU studies – seems to be unavoidable.