

**Daniel Cohn-Bendit**

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This afternoon whilst strolling in the university gardens I had a most extraordinary, if not hallucinatory, encounter! Just imagine, I found myself face to face with one of your ancient forebears, whose international standing needs no explanation. This key figure in the evolution of European thought was none other than Socrates! When he saw me, he took my arm and engaged me in conversation as if we were two old friends.

Socrates: Dany can you explain to me what all this present agitation in Europe is about? Viewed from the outside it looks more like the chaos of panic than the frenzy that takes hold of an enthusiastic crowd.

Dany: My dear Socrates, without doubt you are aware that the European Union is going through an unprecedented crisis? Perhaps you heard about the shockwave of the subprime crisis in the US in the wake of the Lehman Brothers crash in 2008, closely followed by a global financial implosion, not to say a blow to our economy?

Socrates: But of course! I have even heard it said that it is my country, Greece, that is responsible for the collapse of the single currency and that she pushed her partners to the edge of the abyss. At the same time, I fail to understand why the EU heads of state and government have waited more than two years before doing anything. I am sure you can help me unravel the true nature of this crisis.”

Dany: My dear friend, I am sure that you have doubtless learned that, after you, other philosophers have expressed disenchantment with the world. The metaphysical truth that you held so dear has not escaped the shock of the corrosive thoughts about the existence of ‘other worlds’ to paraphrase your ‘enemy’ Friedrich Nietzsche. You will have to be content with a revised personal reflexion and a truth that, down the years, has become very complex. Similar to your thought provoking phrase “All I know is that I know nothing.” The explanation is that there is no single cause to this crisis that has shaken the foundations of the European house – indeed there are many.

Our societies have undergone rapid change that they have been unable to master. The advanced industrial countries have allowed their citizens a high general standard of living but it has been to the detriment of poor countries, our eco system and equality. Over a number of centuries we have led the world, not only for better but also for worse. Today we have reached a critical stage. The battle against inequality and poverty is far from being won. Today, crises take many and often parallel forms. There are crises in energy resources, foodstuffs, water and climate change; there are crises in finance, economic and social affairs and there is also a crisis of legitimacy.... These crises, inextricably bound together, have, to varying degrees, brought the European Union to its current position.

Socrates: I have, however, heard it said that amongst all these crises is one that actually threatens the survival of the planet. Consequently, how do you explain why the European Union is about to become a green economy and that it is China who is leading the field with cutting edge technology in the energy sector and the environment, massive investment in renewables, energy saving measures, electric vehicles, sustainable development and responsible waste management. After years of destroying their environment and dealing with the burden of natural catastrophes due to climate change, the Chinese leadership seems to have grasped the importance of ecology for sustainable development. The totalitarian nature of its political system also helps as it allows action to be taken relatively quickly!

The Europeans, for their part, seemingly overtaken by events, have had the tendency to oppose growth and respect for the environment. Can you imagine that in Greece they think the answer to the crisis is to cut the programmes that protect the environment! Here is another thing to consider! Instead of trying to get an economic bounce out of investment in sustainable development and know how, Europeans seem bent on putting up with a recession that threatens the Union with collapse. This distresses me, all the more so as they were the forerunners of the precautionary principle and the first to sound the alarm on climate change!

Dany: Your wisdom surprises me. You have understood two fundamental things. The first is that it is totally artificial to view these crises in isolation and, if one does, the search for solutions will run aground. If we do not recognise the link between our economic and environmental problems we will make the wrong diagnosis and as a result fail to administer the correct medicine. As you have already remarked, the Europeans appear to be running in the wrong direction. Instead of coming together to defend their interests at global level and upholding the values on which the European Union rests, the Member States are beating a retreat. Today, the *raison d'être* of the European Union is to be able to operate politically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the spirit of democracy and social justice, to name two of its guiding principles. It would be naive to think that inertia would at least guarantee the continuation of the status quo. Political inaction carries frightening risks; not only is no progress made but what has been achieved could easily be lost.

It is said that Europe is not America and that the federalist idea of a united states of Europe is absurd. It is also said that the idea of a common European space is a fantasy as the citizens of Europe are above all Greeks, Italians, French and Swedes etc. For my part I believe differently and that the mistake is to fix individuals in a single identity. In any case, what is clear is that European states have never been able to comprehend and accept the true nature of sovereignty sharing. I am not saying it is easy. Neither am I claiming that from one day to the next we can achieve the level of political maturity that will allow us to pursue responsible policies for the good of mankind. But we really have to get over this Europe of 27 governments that cobble things together. The present European reality is actually its leaders reacting to the timetable of national elections. Europe is what one thinks of when things are going badly and it is even held responsible for things for which it is not even competent. Europe is surrounded by beliefs and superstitions!

Do you realise my dear Socrates that despite the critical mass that the European Union has attained after its successive enlargements, its Member States continue to think of themselves as small open economies in competition with each other? Because they perpetuate, both at national and European level, the illusion of having absolute sovereignty, a heroic history and a national destiny they are incapable of seeing the 500 million inhabitants, a rich continent, the leading global market and the economic resilience they constitute together. The 'lie' of the native that you describe in your 'Republic' unfortunately continues to function so well that it is almost impossible to shake it once it has entered hearts and minds. I ask myself, however, what we could use to replace your white lie that is no longer valid? The war/peace idea is still around but it is less powerful. What positive aspect of European history could we invoke? Is there a new European myth or as the Anglo Saxons would say what is the narrative? Or will we have to call upon the disillusionment and political maturity of our European societies? I do not yet have the answer – but I have to admit, dear Socrates, that when it comes down to it I am your disciple: "I know only that I know nothing."

The second essential element that you raised and which European governments seem to have lost sight of is to ensure growth and employment, in other words the good of their people.

Certain sociologists claim that Europe is the only civilisation that has freed itself from religion even though they themselves are still sensitive to the practices of the established churches. Things are not so simple, however, as Europe has recycled its historical versions of monotheism and their attendant clergies into new functions. Our economists are just as much the 'soothsayers' as the prophets of past times and their word is similarly respected. I am still perplexed by the obduracy of

leaders, advisors and commentators, who refuse to accept reality and the failure of the policies they have continued to follow. This model of development has passed its prime and neoliberal globalisation has reached its limits. For the moment, nobody can deny the necessity of budgetary discipline to reduce exorbitant national debts. This must not, however, make us forget that these debts primarily come from the sharing of losses accumulated by the financial system since 2007. In other words a shameful transfer of responsibility to the general public in the countries affected. From now on, for better or worse, rigorous policies of constraint have become indispensable if we are to return our economies to lasting good health. Nevertheless, without massive proactive investment policies for restructuring this out of date economic model, we will never get out of this crisis. Restructuring has become a necessity: a European bond issue could provide the necessary finance.

In addition, a green economy presents a real opportunity for creating growth and employment as the Chinese and some European countries (Germany with the Socialist/Green coalition proposal to abandon nuclear power) have well understood. It cannot be stated too often that austerity alone will not lead to sustainable growth. This means that we need both the capacity to contain but also reduce levels of poverty and inequality.

Socrates, have you thought about the damage this “religion” has caused? In a country like France, growth is seen as manna from heaven awarded by omnipresent and all-powerful markets as a reward for the nation’s efforts. The Protestant ethic has been secularised but the debate contains nothing new. Between 1974 and 2005, in spite of the crises and ‘weak’ growth – that is to say less than measured previously- French national wealth doubled i.e. 100% growth in 30 years. But in the same period unemployment exploded and the number of those living in poverty has not declined. On the contrary poverty levels have slightly risen. Responsible policy is expected to recognise that budget cuts indiscriminately attack health, education, housing and social security and constitute a time bomb. In crisis periods and the absence of global governance able to reduce market pressure this kind of wisdom is lacking. Instead of tackling the real problem of the economic model that has dominated until the present, world leaders much prefer to reduce legal and social rights using the excuse of improving competitiveness. And yet those companies that do well in Europe understand competitiveness rests on innovation and high quality of both goods and services. In so far as we, in contrast to the United States, are not leaders in our knowledge-based economy it would be a shame to miss out on ‘excellence’ in manufacturing industry. The sacrificial logic is in fact just a pretence at a solution. Not only because it has detached itself from the principle of social justice but also because it is bad economics. Reducing social security simply reduces an economy’s reserves depriving it of the means to weather periods of crisis. In Britain alone, between now and 2013, there will be some 600000 children living in poverty . The poor always more poor! Is this our ideal society? A fatalist approach to the markets that leads to violent economic behaviour and societal distress will lose us everything.

Socrates: In one sense this is akin to the logic that has prevailed in my country. I do not want to minimise in the least its catastrophic administration, its fraudulent entry into the euro, the corruption of cronyism, the excessive and archaic influence of the Orthodox Church, the incredible amount of tax evasion and a misplaced nationalism that has resulted in an absurd defence budget – the highest in Europe in terms of percentage of GDP.

Greek society needs to change and review the privileges that some sectors of society have enjoyed, be they priests, ship owners, property developers or members of prominent families etc. It would be suicidal if the country continues to pile up irreparable debts without someone becoming concerned. After so many years of laxity in Greece and other European countries, trying to impose a brutal austerity programme that neither offers hope for the future nor an investment plan to get back on track, is more akin to a punishment than a helping hand to get out of the mess.

Dany: Once again what you say is absolutely right. It is an illusion to think that the Greeks will support the cleansing of their public finances without a programme of reflation. For years political parties were based on abuses that were detrimental to the ‘res publica’. When Greece joined the

European Economic Community in 1981, she had barely emerged from the dictatorship of the colonels, whose influence was then, and still is, discernable. The coming to power of Andreas Papandreou in 1980 was a first step in the abolition of the 'castes' but it was equally the beginning of a long-standing system of pork barrel politics. Just like you and me, the Greeks knew that this 'partitocracy' that prospered in the corruption and cronyism of the system was ruinous for the country. The tripartite coalitions that emerged as a result of recent domestic political dramas offered no convincing perspective. With the odd exception it appears that the political caste is primarily involved in domestic political infighting. Major structural reforms are needed in Greece.... One has the right to ask why the clergy, paid by the state and who exercise serious economic power, still pay no tax? Is it because the constitution is under the sign of the Holy Trinity? How do you explain the absence of Greek and European initiatives in finding a solution to the problem of Cyprus and demilitarising the conflict with Turkey? For some countries fantasies about Turkey allow them to fill their coffers with sales of armaments – light tanks, helicopters frigates, submarines – to the benefit of defence industries essentially in France and Germany and helping fill some of the gaps in Greek finances.

In any case we need to understand that beyond the erratic behaviour of some of the players, the fact that the Greek euro crisis reached such an advanced level was due to a lack of cohesion on the part of the Member States, undermining our credibility both inside and outside Europe.

Socrates: If I understand your argument Europeans are now paying heavily for an absence of 'Europe' and especially the lack of solidarity? All this discussion against the European Union interfering in Member States, jealous of their national sovereignty has resulted in 'poison chalice' solutions. Is state-sovereignty becoming a new religion?

Dany: My dear Socrates, you could not have expressed my thoughts better. Even if I never gave in to the temptation to have an academic master, I am forced to recognise your enormous talent. It is frequently very hard to find any political coherence on the part of heads of state and government in their pronouncements on Europe.

When the first worrying signs appeared in Greece, Angela Merkel was busy with regional elections and other domestic affairs. Contamination, however does not let you wait. Too little too late- all the measures finally thrown together in the emergency of a catastrophic situation were none other than short breaths before the following wave. The intergovernmental system of policy making has run out of steam. The absence of solidarity ended up in sinking our economies and especially damaging the internal market. Protectionist tendencies are 'Maginot lines' to hide the loss of control. The protectionism that followed the Great Depression of 1929 demonstrated that the mad desire to save oneself ended up having the opposite effect. The only sort of protection lies in a common response to a common challenge. When the large European countries balk at aiding their partners in difficulty, the euro takes a hit, the rating agencies revise downwards and the cost of borrowing in Europe rises. It is exactly the opposite as to what happens in countries that are even more in debt like Japan and the US. I have not even talked about the low credibility of Europeans in the matter of budgetary discipline. Only Luxemburg, Finland and Estonia currently meet euro zone criteria. It was not that long ago that France and Germany demonstrated that the so-called strictures of the European Union could be ignored when they broke the stability pact and suffered no sanctions. You do not need much more to undermine market confidence. By definition a norm is not optional. Without binding legislation the single currency will simply not survive. As to the budget pact agreed by the European Council on 31 January, besides being useless it is now at the mercy of the ratification process in the Member States.... In effect an unpredictable situation!

The Greek and euro crises are part of a global-wide turbulence and are the result of European inconsistency. In other words, if the euro crisis has reached such a serious level it is primarily because, since its creation, we have refused to recognise that the single currency has no hope of survival without a common economic, fiscal and budgetary government.

Socrates: But if this crisis that the Union is going through is the product of a Europe governed by the Member States in which the institutions charged with protecting the common interest have a secondary role, one could legitimately think that reinforcing the community aspect of Europe would improve the lot of its members. The contrary is not possible. The Union has therefore become the only way Europe can participate politically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Only the Union has the capacity to deal with the economic and financial effects of globalisation and ensure sustainable social and environmental development.

Dany: You've got it! From now on, globalisation is a reality that will touch all our daily lives but that is not to say that we will be unable to influence how it spreads or how it will affect us. Some troublemakers will tell you that 'de-globalisation' is possible and that a return to the terra firma of the nation state is the only way to salvation for the Europeans. Needless to say, this solution is neither possible nor desirable. As a number of your eminent colleagues have said, man only exists when he makes something of himself. This is just what populists from all sides are seeking to hinder be they fake politicians, unproductive eurosceptics or any other kind of false prophet. To greater or lesser effect, totalitarian ideologies, societies based on fear and exclusion, so-called political plan Bs, the myth of de globalisation and I don't know what are strategies disassociated from reality that will hinder the development of individuals and society. They represent a lack of imagination and a failure to take responsibility for what is happening in the world. These defeatist manoeuvres can only lead to helplessness.

If we accept that globalisation is here to stay, we must refuse all 'avoidance strategies' that will make us lose contact with reality. We need to find out how to operate in the world and recognise the facts.

The construction of Europe was a historic and remarkable development in the process of reconciliation. This new entity created without violence or conquest has forced the continent's citizens to experiment with new methods of government. After decades of peace and prosperity, this edifice is now seriously threatened: solidarity has shattered, there is growing insecurity and Europeans face a dark future.

Nobody seeks to belittle the role that the nation state has played. Without doubt it was an effective response at a certain moment in history. Today, however, globalisation and the interdependence it has brought have removed for all time its power to shape a nation's destiny. How can you not be appalled, faced with the refusal of the Member States to allow the Union more responsibility when this would be the only way to operate effectively in today's world? How much longer are they going to remain attached to the empty shell of national sovereignty?

Socrates: Listening to you it would seem that Europeans are getting back in touch with their stoic ancestors! As you know, I was lucky enough to have experienced the age of Athenian democracy. But for my successors in the Hellenic period getting on in the city became practically impossible due to a change in social politics. As a result they found refuge in withdrawing from the world. This kind of act of renunciation is admirably summed up by one of my most illustrious successors, Hegel. In his 'Phenomenology of Spirit' he, with good reason, says that the stoic conscience claims to be 'equally free on a throne or in chains.' In other words, it neither participates nor recognises the real world – the stoic lives in the abstract. He no longer has a material form, he has 'left' this 'base world'.

Dany: Your analogy is correct. Without global governance, the European nations will be deprived of their power to operate in the real world and are on the way to losing their political autonomy. Seen from this angle, you will understand that Europe's response will represent an almost existential if not vital turn. To a certain extent it is this difficulty from which politics suffers most today. Modern politics, born from the rediscovery of your teaching and that of your contemporaries by Renaissance Europeans opened up many possibilities: as Leibniz said, that which might be may never come about or it could be completely different i.e. 'better'. This has been the basis for political action.

Socrates: Dany, I am totally with you on this point. The worth of politics can also be measured in its capacity for anticipation. Instead of suffering things and opposing them with a reaction reflex politics need to engage in a process of civilising the various forces and opening up horizons to other possible scenarios using the maximum publicity. Political action is at its most effective when dealing with reality and has the declared objective of transforming something into an idea that is closer to achieving the general good - an ideal something in the image of my philosopher king. But when the frame of reference is out of date and the perception of reality is not longer valid then political action is running on empty. The fuel of democracy, i.e. the right to speak, runs out in the general chatter called 'communication' or in the lies of 'demagogy.' The moral crisis expands and man is moved to despair in line with the decline in good sense and honesty.

In the course of the European adventure, Europeans have at least demonstrated their capacity to change things. As you have explained, in being reconciled they have made possible this new, free union of states that has enabled reunification and opened up horizons from the Rhine and the Oder to the Bosphorus – even if this vision has somewhat faded in spite of going in the right direction! I have the impression that we have lost this will to open up to each other and replaced it with a retreat into disintegration. In this manner we have seen the growth of the most bizarre ideas, one of which is that of a Roman Consul departing Berlin to discipline Greece.

Dany: Socrates, like me you have understood that by delaying moves to greater integration, the Europeans are drastically reducing their chances of being an effective global player. Without some form of radical post nation state change that will allow them to deal with these massive changes, it would not be out of place to imagine that the EU will start to decline and become a curiosity of the past. Far too often we forget the burden of irreversibility. The climate change crisis is one of the most frightening examples. It has confronted us with restrictions that will affect how we can develop without burdening future generations with debt.

If national politics often loses sight of Europe it also equally seems satisfied with a short-termism where the requirements of the electoral cycle often prevail. It is not surprising if national politics fails to produce far seeing policies and Europe ends up paying the penalty.

Socrates, my friend, I think that this discussion has demonstrated that complexity is an antidote to the structures of monolithic ideologies and enriches our ways of dealing with the world. We are collectively responsible for what kind of 'worlds' we view as possible. I am sure you share my idea of the 'credible utopia' that is the European project. This utopia is essential for it allows us to shake off fatalism and tackle the future - in other words, to fulfil our destiny in the new century.

Socrates: I delight in your enthusiasm that makes it clear to me that it is up to us, the citizens of Greece and Europe, to reclaim public debate and democracy. Our society needs a determined reform movement to tackle all the malfunctions that have brought our country to the edge of the abyss. I would like to propose a European 'pact for the future'. The first stage would be to open the widest possible public debate in Greece to decide which reforms are indispensable and desirable. This will of course mean that we will have to touch on taboos such as the exorbitant number of civil servants (the result of political cronyism) that includes priests and the military. If we drop our aggressive ideology vis à vis the Turks, that should lead to a drastic reduction in military expenditure providing a real boost to the national budget! For its part, Europe should reaffirm its guarantee of our territorial integrity and set in motion an investment programme for sustainable development in an energetic and autonomous Greece. I think we have enough political maturity to understand that we will not be saved by a providential figure. Looking at our failure, the solution will be collective or not at all. For a long period, the Athenian democratic ideal was at the heart of Greek civilisation. Your European utopia will not be credible unless the effort to achieve it is equitably shared. I would like to close this voyage of reflexion with a lesson from your old friend Cornelius Castoriadis who said: Democracy as regime is both the regime achieving individual and collective autonomy as well as the common good as defined by the appropriate collective. Well Dany, we Greeks will have to learn again how to think and create the common good.

**Daniel Cohn-Bendit** (born 4 April 1945 in Montauban, France) is a Franco-German politician (Bundnis90/The Greens and Europe Ecologie) and political commentator who currently is a Member of the European Parliament. He was the most prominent spokesperson for the May 1968 revolution in Paris. After his deportation from France he was active in Germany in the socialist student movement (SDS) and the non-parliamentary opposition. In Frankfurt on Main in the 1970s he was a leading figure on the spontaneous action scene and the publisher of *Pflasterstrand*, an alternative city magazine. With Joschka Fischer he was one of the original members of the alternative movement. In 1984 he joined the Green party where he represented the 'Realo' wing. In 1989 he was honorary head of department for multi cultural affairs in the first red-green municipal authority in Frankfurt. In 1994 he was elected to the European Parliament, where he has been co chairman of the Green/European Free Alliance group since 2002. He alternates being a candidate for the Greens in France and Germany. In the last European Parliament elections he headed the Europe Ecologie list in France and led the party to an unexpectedly successful 16.28 percent. In the spring of 2009 he published "Que faire? Petit traité d'imagination politique à l'usage des Européens." Cohn-Bendit is a German citizen and lives in Frankfurt.

