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Europe's Place in the World

The idea that one is European mostly first strikes people when they are in a far-flung corner of the world. From afar, carefully guarded regional and national differences become blurred and you realise how negative our European naval gazing is in the global context. The European Union is, at the most, only a medium-sized political player that by 2050 will decline demographically to a residual population. It is China, India and Brazil that demonstrate glittering economic expansion. Even Turkey is growing faster than the single market that she so recently sought to join – but she now has other oriental/Ottoman ambitions. In the USA, the last few Atlanticists are dying out, while in Russia and Central Asia they are increasingly pursuing a policy of estrangement and isolation. Europe, from which 500 years ago economic, cultural and political ideas emanated to circle the globe, appears to want to live up to the name of 'the Old World.'

There is much euro sceptic talk at the moment but does this sad picture of unstoppable decadence stand up to scrutiny? Europe may well have passed the demographic turning point that other nations still have to face but for immigrants and visitors it is still an attractive destination even though we try to scare them off with fortress-like walls and unwelcoming attitudes. The euro may well be having a turbulent time but it is still a relatively hard currency and the European single market and social model are more solid than the houses of cards represented by the US economy and the People's Republic that uses authoritarian methods to push economic development and expresses little concern for either the individual or the environment. One should also consider that the Chinese economy, with its double digit growth from a low base, is in fact developing at the same rate as the German economy increasing at 1 percent, although GDP figures actually say little about the real state of society. Others such as India and Brazil soon lose some of their shine when you look closely and discern their wide inequalities, power structures and corrupt practices. Post colonial self doubt needs to be put in perspective and Europe, having gone through two world wars and deprived of power by its own inability to act, could regard its achievements and potential with more confidence.

It needs to be said, however, that this half way positive view remains unrecognised in both Europe and the rest of the world. Internally people like to talk about 'Brussels' – it is discussed around the dinner table with friends or in seminars with young students or by panels of white haired experts. In the wider arena there is much speculation about the decline of the euro as old scores are settled. The United Kingdom is retreating from the continent. Putin's Russia behaves like the infamous Eastern bloc, with those of the communist and nationalist opposition groups tolerated by him being even worse. Without wanting to invoke a conspiracy theory, one could claim that certain players in the financial markets have waged an economic war on the EU and continue to do so.

I would like to demonstrate that they are making a big mistake and will regret it when, in the foreseeable future, a United States of Europe will emerge from this crisis. That such a thing could happen is just one scenario. There is no guarantee that it will find a way out of the current crisis or secure a life insurance policy for the maintenance of the European Union. But the possibility is there that the Union will continue to exist and will be successful but we need to pursue this without too much utopian exuberance. Europe's capabilities are not a function of the relative weaknesses of other powers: the decline of the old super powers; the increasing fragility of the Chinese economic boom; the loans given to emerging countries enjoying economic growth but facing domestic conflict and external threats. Europe only really looks better when we compare its leadership with Russia's oligarchs, the old men of the Chinese Communist party central committee, the theocracy of the mullahs or a Jesus freak going for the job in the White House. Our potential comes from the self-belief that Europeans exhibit and mutually acknowledge, namely that we are not powerless: we can bring the bloom back to Europe and can show the way in a world that has come apart at the seams.

The nature of European characteristics and qualities

What is the nature of European characteristics and qualities? Historically they are the result of the cultural diversity in a very limited geographic area that permitted rapid economic modernisation, relatively balanced societies and sophisticated forms of liberal democracy, including the rule of law – the whole taking place in astonishingly complex and varied situations. These developments took place because of a self-confident citizenry, state promoted education in the arts, sciences and technology and an increasingly influential workers' movement that, for the most part, has moved from a fundamental rejection of capitalism to a system of market restraint and corporate social responsibility. It was this base that made the 19th century the European century: Europe's products, the result of raw material imports from outside, especially the east, were exported around the globe. It was here that we first observed the pernicious effect of a brutal, racist, colonial system bent on domination and exploitation whose violence backfired on Europe; after the bloody conflicts with nationalism, Europe's place in the world was morally compromised, permanently and politically weakened. Europe became known as the source of two totalitarian dictatorships, responsible for terrible prison camps as well as racist and class hatred that lacked any respect for human dignity.

The new Rome became Washington DC – at the time in many respects a European power that embodied and brought together the West. The 'old world' was divided and demoted. Moscow type communism was able to fascinate even those in the West into the 1970s. Europe was caught up in the East-West conflict as a possible battlefield in a nuclear war and controlled by what had once been its dependents and satellites. But this was not a final defeat. Under the aegis of the United States and as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union, the western half of Europe had the opportunity to become a new and seminal supranational force; more than a loose federation but not a proper federal state; and in global terms, the most advanced attempt at overcoming national narrow mindedness. This is essentially what politicians today mean when they enthuse over the European

project for peace and young people almost threateningly claim that they are not doing enough to achieve it.

Finally, in 1990, when it appeared that all hope had been lost, a united Germany provided the motor for the reunification of a Europe that could become a global player, not just on the grounds of its economic transformation, but also as a new type of major power in a multipolar world (the central idea of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty). The European Union needed to enlarge and with its expansion to 27 members this process appeared almost precipitous. It also needed to deepen but, as you know, this has happened only in a piecemeal fashion. Making the jump to a new type of federal state with a more flexible interpretation as to the meaning of national boundaries has, for the moment, failed and the current crisis management provided by the Franco-German directorate is an example of major democratic deficit.

Transnational demos

While populists and supporters of the nation state are up in arms about any further relinquishing of sovereignty, dealing with the financial crisis, starting with the fiscal pact, will mean that we will have to go even further down this road. We will need to move to the next stage of collectivisation, requiring us to develop a form of transnational demos that does not destroy our linguistic and cultural multiplicity nor diminish our regional diversity but sees the Union as providing the frame of reference and focus for our political identity. What is still missing to achieve this?

Whatever our origins, mother tongue, convictions, beliefs (or none) – the best way to a ‘third level’ Europe would be to include those millions with immigrant backgrounds. Why do so many Europeans find this idea unlikely or inappropriate? Why do we repudiate this unmistakable convergence towards a European society? You only have to compare the social structures of Poland, France and Germany in 1950 with those of today! Why do we cling to national and regional organisations, mistrust supra national government and prefer to rely on the national varieties that are daily made aware of their limited ability to control events? Why are European governments shovelling money to the international banks while at the same time pursuing a cold blooded policy of austerity that is destroying the trust the southern peripheral states have in the Union? Why does each individual country tinker with its industrial and energy infrastructure (the Germans with renewables, the Alpine lands with hydro and bio energy, the Norwegians and British with gas, the French and Polish with nuclear) instead of getting together to create a trans national network? Why have Europeans been unable to speak with one voice on all the major political conflicts of the last decades, from the war in Yugoslavia to the Libyan crisis?

These are just some of the major ‘buts’ that confront the possibility of a real European Union. Clearly memories of the First and Second World Wars are not enough to bring Europe together in the same course. The invocation of Europe as a project for peace fails to attract young people, who are used to inter-railing from the North Cape to Gibraltar or visiting the Acropolis without much showing of passports or changing of money. We urgently need a new project for European

peace and development that will offer advantages to young people but, above all, engage their long-term sympathy and support. You will not be able to do this just with cheaper roaming tariffs for mobile phones.

Let us remember: the European Community project began in the 1950s with the European Coal and Steel Community (Montan Union) and Euratom. It was driven by economics but not just integration by means of the single market. The new project for a United States of Europe must not be one based on simply welding together national structures to create a European power. It can also not simply be based on more growth, more market economy and more affluence. A better quality European Union needs to be more comprehensive, with democratic, cultural and environmental dimensions.

Energy union with open borders

Let us consider the latter, one year after Fukushima and record prices for oil and other raw materials. There is now a common consensus that the era of fossil fuels and nuclear is at an end, indeed it is over except among hardened representatives of the old industrial complex. Even the German government has pursued an energy change policy that has been one of go it alone or at any rate piecemeal. The 'realists' in all camps have recovered and national economies have gone back to their old ways. This will not only be fatal for the environment but also for economic development. If the old industrial and energy policies continue to hold sway that will sound the death knell of Europe as an industrial powerhouse. No one seriously believes that the current, deceptive attractions of the automobile, chemical and airport sectors will be able to withstand the pressure of global competition and the effects of the crisis in primary resources. Today, Europe's industrial strength depends on the convergence of future economic and environmental interests. Europe can only play a leading role in world markets and satisfy the needs of global justice if it becomes an all-embracing green and equitable economy.

One can therefore see what kind of responsibility the German government has taken on with its intention to promote energy change. To date she has only half-heartedly begun this process. Consultation with, involvement of and support for her European partners has been inadequate. These changes can only be successfully carried out as an EU project and Europe could best begin on her immediate southern periphery where solar, bio and wind power could be generated in abundance and fed into a smart Union-wide electricity network. This would contribute to protecting against climate change and reduce dependence on gas and oil. Even more important, it would provide the new democratic countries of North Africa with economic development in the form of renewable energy in an era after the departure of the oil despots. The Western Balkans, diminished by ethnic conflict could also join in with the establishment of solar energy in Greece and Turkey. Even with ifs and buts this appears to be a reasonable scenario but it is far from what Europe and its neighbours are currently prepared to undertake.

The utopia of an energy union with open borders is nevertheless correct. Europe would not only have a new source of energy at the technical/economic level but

the interaction between means of production, political regimes and peace is obvious. You can see how this would have negative effects on Putin's gas sheikdom and 'petrocrats' from Algeria to Iran to say nothing of tourist paradises such as Greece and Portugal, where a wealthy minority take the profits leaving the mass of the population of these sunny southern countries with little alternative but poverty and indebtedness. There is empirical proof that regimes reliant on oil or nuclear energy limit democracy and civil society. For this reason the EU must endeavour to ensure that, in North Africa and the south-eastern part of the Union, environmentally friendly economic development is accompanied by measures to strengthen democracy.

However, and this is a crucial argument, the EU in its present form will have to ask itself whether it has the required power and authority. Its internal and external reputation would suggest not but I would like to repeat my rejection of the ideas of the gloom-mongers: the European system offers the best alternative to the obsolescent casino capitalism of globalisation; it still offers opportunities for membership and privileged association; it offers the best blueprint for sustainable development in the wake of the illusion of perpetual growth. But there are no guarantees, there is no philosophical goal and more importantly there is a lack of democratic legitimacy. If the EU, in the form of a precursor to a United States of Europe, conducted a referendum as to what the public thought of 'Brussels' you would be left with just a pile of broken glass. All kinds of populists and nationalists would throw a spanner in the works of European cosmopolitanism. This would be right but for the wrong reasons. The EU is a top down organisation when it needs to be bottom up. Consolidating its external image and regaining the ability to shape and control global developments are closely connected. The world will not believe in Europe's claims as long as there is no supra national democracy. What there is, is merely a network of local and regional structures for public participation that shows a greater than previous interest and involvement in the European agenda. So little is foreseen that the current crisis will have a positive solution (in the past each stage of European integration has been preceded by a crisis). Europe's definition of itself as being in a crisis situation is equally part of the language of new Europe just as it was part of the old version. It has self-refuting characteristics but it also demonstrates a high recognition of the problem of the fragility of political negotiation, something one does not find in the triumphalism of China or Brazil. The modern historian, Andreas Wirsching has summed it up as: Europe's crisis –is the process of coming together. In other words: more Europe is the answer to every threat of disintegration.

Cultural aspect of intergration

It will not always turn out well but it points to a third element, often ignored or neglected, namely the cultural aspect of integration. This is more than the high culture of museums, opera, theatre and literature; more than festivals, ballet and book fairs but no other continent offers such a wealth and variety of cultural institutions and events. Culture is also not just defined in the creative sense such as in design, film, television, fashion, computer games, the advertising industry and such like. Nowadays it is not only in Europe that these sectors do better than the automobile and chemical industries and put the old ways of working in the

shade. European culture has not yet been absorbed by the predominantly US standards for mass consumerism that contribute to global tastes, brands and life style. Immigrant workers have increased our cultural diversity over the decades and more and more Europeans have a non-European background but the linguistic and religious diversity of the 'old world' is well able to cope with this.

Europe has fascinated the world with its technology, its economic strength and its welfare state even when recent years have not shown such a strong performance. Europe is most recognised for its cultural symbols and here we must take up another definition of culture based on exchanges between the cities that once provided the wealth of ideas that were Europe's most important resource for good. The American science journalist, Jonah Lehrer in his latest book 'Imagine: How Creativity Works' emphasises the influence of large urban centres. They are productive because in towns people are subject to a wider range of experiences, often unexpected and must interact with strangers. Figures such as Leonardo, Erasmus and Shakespeare may well have been geniuses but their exceptional talents developed in a European culture that rewarded new ideas, laid emphasis on a general education and did not try to hinder discoveries. Many other cultures in the world suffer from a system governed by law and censure, forcing individuals with ideas into a straight jacket of ideology and limited intellectual freedom. These systems also fear freedom of speech. This is not to speak against people and ideas of non-European origin but rather against the ideologies and institutions that hinder their development. Immigration from the world's young southern societies is a fundamental requirement for the maintenance of creativity in aging European societies. Another requirement to maintain a richness of ideas is the presence of young people, who, out of ignorance and naivety, ask exactly the sort of dumb questions that take us out of the old way of thinking and give us a new way to look at things. In other words Europe's strength is not just based on its many engineers, bankers, businessmen and lawyer but also on the presence of daydreamers and mavericks.

You know you are in Europe not just when in the wider world the differences hit you in the eye but also when you are in your own little niche or neighbourhood. An example of such a niche is Vinschgau in the southern Tyrol, an isolated valley little touched by mass tourism in the predominantly German speaking border area between Austria, Switzerland and Italy. I was recently struck by certain European characteristics there: the sophistication of the famers, winegrowers and craftsmen drawing on century old traditions, the diversification that affluence has made possible and the enormous understanding they have for nature and the countryside. The Vinschgau, however, is anything but an idyll: it increasingly lacks water for the orchards and vineyards, a situation that climate change could easily make worse; the population is aging and visitors could easily stay away or demand the mass tourism attractions of rock festivals and such events. In the whole of the southern Tyrol the old tensions between the various ethnic groups (German, Italian and Dolomite) have never been overcome. On the contrary, employment and marriage markets are separate and even in kindergartens and schools young people do not really mix. Until now the inhabitants of this autonomous province that are allowed to keep nine out of

every ten tax euros raised, have enjoyed a steadily increasing standard of living while existing social and ethnic contrasts have remained much the same. If you ask local representatives what will happen when the bankrupt Italian government demands this wealthy northern province pay up, they are somewhat at a loss. There are three possible scenarios: those determined to defend their affluent standard of living demand "let us leave Rome" for complete autonomy or even annexation to Austria or Bavaria as though the future lay there. In contrast to this panic reaction of each saving him or herself, others consider the option of making the leap to being a global player with high tech firms, world class universities, centres of creativity and top class tourism with appropriate cultural attractions. This all or nothing approach would leave many behind and make the existing inequalities even more extreme. Is there a third possibility? Perhaps if the majority of the southern Tyroleans were able to accept that their current standard of living is sufficient and that in the medium term they would be prepared to reduce it a little if they could make better use of their cultural diversity and could recollect their old strengths. This 'less is more' does have a lot of support in the region but this kind of strategy will be more likely to be successful if Bolzano and its surrounding valleys cooperated with other regional centres in Vorarlberg and Tyrol as well as with neighbouring Italian and Swiss provinces. Why not form alliances with a wider area than the southern German states, with distant neighbours from France to Slovenia? Not, however, as a central European paradise or safe haven for the rich but as a global but emphatically European power centre of environmental renewal that could well eventually prove to be profitable.

Such ideas also meet with reservation in Vinschgau as business people and managers see their profits vanish; trade unions fear loss of redistribution from higher taxes; economists view zero growth as a crime and political elites are fearful of such long term and risky proposals. It is clearer than ever, however, that business as usual does not hold much prospect of success.

This region is a microcosm of Europe's global possibilities: regression to the nation state; global market leadership and the green alternative. Just about all nation states have to function in this system but as German energy change demonstrated, they all, despite public pronouncements and lip service to the contrary, go it alone. European energy policy is piecemeal but only close cooperation will enable the EU to create a Union-wide network and meet climate change targets. This will not only increase economic inter dependence but also improve political cooperation within the EU and with its neighbours to the south and east. In these latter areas one feels one is European and as such is recognised and respected. The question once posed by US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, half in scorn and half in despair as to which telephone number he should call for Europe, has still not been answered. He did not, however, mean by that the renaissance of European super powers but rather closer cooperation of foreign and security policies and a more rational approach in other policy areas such as agriculture, technology and, today, in energy and development.

Conclusion

Making the leap to a United States of Europe, a political entity with its own constitution and socio-economic construction is in the air, despite all the national and regional bluster. Moving forward now would be consistent with the current situation as the finance and debt crises require more 'Brussels' and common economic, fiscal and social policies. If this is imposed and executed top down, however, then this could very well be the last EU crisis as the accumulated weight of the democratic deficit finally bursts the Union asunder. For this reason, local and regional initiatives are now of great importance because it is only from these that there will emerge a European society, an EU citizenship and a supra national sovereign power. It now depends on us, the people of Europe. We do not have to wait for Joachim Gauck to invite us to start the process. It was, however, not a bad thing that the new German President linked active citizenship and Europe in his inaugural speech.

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