

Europe: Heir to the Ages, or Pregnant Widow ?

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‘The death of the contemporary forms of social order ought to gladden rather than trouble the soul. But what is frightening is that the departing world leaves behind it not an heir, but a pregnant widow. Between the death of one and the birth of the other, much water will flow by, a long night of chaos and desolation will pass ‘.

These were the words of Alexander Herzen, the Russian democratic exile, written shortly after the failure of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Herzen understood the revolutions’ message to be that the old empires of the Holy Alliance were doomed – although he could not know that their final doom would not come for more than seventy years. Although the empires had reasserted control, the real victors of 1848, he thought, had been the European bourgeoisie and their values which Herzen despised as narrow, repressive and selfish. But he was certain that the middle-class victory was doomed too, and that the bourgeois order would itself collapse as the peoples of Europe, the urban and rural masses, rose and created their own unimaginable forms of freedom.

Like many things Herzen said and wrote, this magnificent prophecy seems to say more about Russia itself than about western Europe. Many of you will remember his bitter comparison, during his London exile, between the traditions of Polish and Russian émigré revolutionaries. The Poles, he said, could look back to countless holy relics; the Russians had only empty cradles. Some Russian intellectuals, after about 1860, might feel that the Tsarist regime was dead on its feet and that dark forces were slowly gathering to sweep it away. But was the second half of the 19th century really ‘a long night of desolation and chaos’ in France, Britain or Germany? We think of it as the supreme historical moment of European self-confidence; the maximum expansion of colonial empires, the decades of breakneck industrialisation and urbanisation as Germany, France and Italy caught up with British pre-eminence, the period of the first effective globalisation through trade and through intercontinental transport and communications, the emergence of modern cities with their blaze of middle-class wealth and their enormous proletarianised workforces.

Nevertheless, when I read that prophecy I cannot help thinking about Europe – the big Europe – of today. For 1848, we can read 1989, or 1991 – the collapse of external and then internal Soviet Communism, and the end of the 50-year Cold War which had at once divided Europe and frozen it into a sort of unnatural stability.

I don't want to repeat Herzen's sort of exaggeration. You could hardly call the last 18 years in Europe 'a dark night of desolation.' But the chaos is there, global of course and not merely European, and so is the sense of living in an interval, a transition between orders.

I think it was Immanuel Wallerstein who wrote almost as the Soviet Union was collapsing that we had understood these huge events in precisely the wrong way. The collapse of Soviet power, he argued, did not mark the beginning of a period in which the United States dominated the globe without challenge. On the contrary, it meant almost the opposite; the moment at which America *lost* control of most of the world – the so-called Free World – as the discipline of the Cold War and its monolithic purpose fell apart. It is since 1989, not since September 2001, that we have been inhabiting that 'New World Disorder'.

Although the change – *die Wende* – is almost 20 years old now, it seems to me that we Europeans have still not absorbed what it means. Over many decades, we became used to the image of Europe – in reality, just western Europe – as it was in the Cold War, and by 1989 the narratives about Europe invented in that period were beginning to coagulate into received history. Now it's time to ask: was that little Europe, with its social-market economies, its huge conscript armies and its comfortably anti-nationalist political cultures, 'the real thing'? It expressed the most attractive European values, and yet I believe that it was not the end-station,

the terminus of European history. For one thing, it's irrevocably over. So Europe after 1989 has entered a Herzen gap; Europa is a pregnant widow, and the 'real Europe' – far from being ancient - has not yet been born.

Talking about 'the real thing' is lax and essentialist. Still, I am not utterly opposed to essentialisms as long as we remember that they are constructions made by each generation to be knocked down and replaced by the next. A salute here to the late great historian Gwyn Alf Williams, Professor at Aberystwyth and then Cardiff. The title of his best-known book is a question, ironic but of piercing relevance to loose talk about 'real Europes'. It was called: 'When Was Wales?'

So when was Europe? Some absurd answers to an absurd question. The European Union at Brussels has set its cultural bureaucracy to solve it, demanding roots like a mediaeval king demanding a genealogy back to the Trojans. One answer was 'the Bronze Age' when, it's fancied, Europe was a single market or free trade area exchanging amber, metalwork and furs from the Black Sea to the Baltic and the Atlantic. Another, popular in the optimistic 1990s after the Maastricht Treaty, was the idea of a 'Celtic Europe', the dream (for which the evidence is weak) that all the Continent was inhabited during the later Iron Age by peoples who shared a common family of related languages and a common decorative and social culture. A United Europe, in other words, to be ruled by Jacques Delors kitted out as Asterix.

Older 'whens' look back to an imagined Christian Europe, alias Western Christian Civilisation. Little remains of that. It's only worth noting that every major national culture in Europe has boasted of being the final bulwark of Christendom against eastern barbarism – the French against the brutish Germans, the Germans against the primitive Poles, the Poles against the Asiatic Russians ... and the Russians, of course, against the pagan steppe hordes.

Or it could be argued that Europe was most itself when plundering and devastating the rest of the world – in the age of empires both transoceanic and continental. There were differences between colonial systems, but European attitudes to the Other in conquered and settled continents were remarkably similar.

Or it might be said that Europe has found its true nature in self-slaughter, in repeated outburst of fanatical killing based on a series of absolutist ideologies developed in the heart of Europe: the Counter-Reformation, the witch-burning mania, the doctrines of fascism, exterminatory racialism and Leninism. Seen like that, the continent could recognise its own image most easily in what's been called the 'European Civil War' of 1914 to 1945. After that, the phrase 'European Civilisation', implying that exposure to Beethoven produced benevolence, that appreciating Titian led to tolerance, should have been safely buried.

A more convincing ‘when’ is the time in western Europe now known as the *trente glorieuses*, the thirty or so brilliant years of prosperity and relative social justice between about 1948 and the middle 1970s. Although confined to the Western side of the Cold War line, this was the most sustained period of rapid growth, peace and social stability which any part of the continent had ever experienced. It began with the initial boost of Marshall Plan funding, and grew into the social-democratic consensus, founded on strong, interventionist states with a public sector, committed to full employment and social equality, which lasted until the 1974 oil crisis halted growth and until – after 1979 – the Thatcherite doctrines of uncontrolled free-market competition, privatisation and reduced state provision began to spread across the continent.

If there are ‘European values’, founded on the French Revolution’s triad of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’, then they were never more effectively expressed than in the years of the social-democratic consensus. And, of course, these values persisted underground in other nations east of the Cold War line. Did the Prague Spring 40 years ago, or the Solidarity revolution in 1980, take place in the name of free competition and deregulated labour markets? Of course they didn’t. Liberty, equality and especially a social-democratic version of fraternity, usually expressed through workers’ control of production: these were their slogans.

So the answer to ‘when was Europe?’ is probably ‘Not Yet’. And yet many of those episodes contain a gleam of what could be. The idea of a united Europe in the past is a historical fantasy. And yet the present Union does have ancestors who are not invented. Some are handsome, like King George of Podebrady with his Union of Christian Europe against the Turks. Others are ugly ancestors, like Napoleon who brought lasting institutional and legal unity to much of Europe on the end of a bayonet. Or those Germans, Wilhelmine and then Nazi, who at least perceived that the overseas colonial empires were doomed and that Europe must be united politically and economically to survive in a century dominated by America and Russia. Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman set out to build a united Europe by persuasion, whose economic and political fusion would make future domestic wars impossible. Yet they borrowed from older ideas founded on the notion of unity against external danger, and it is unreal not to recognise that the Cold War and the perceived Communist threat permeated the context in which the Treaty of Rome was signed.

You often hear people talk about ‘the dream of European unity’. But European dreaming has mainly been about the opposite: disunity:- the revolutionary breaking-up of oppressive orders into smaller and more authentic units. The older and more powerful members of society look fondly towards visions of higher unity. The young and frustrated, in contrast, want to break everything down into human-sized fragments.

And yet that is a contradiction more apparent than real. National revolution in Europe, the insurrection for independence, has always been perceived as at the same time an internationalist cause. A united Europe, it was often proposed in the liberal conspiracies of the 19th century, could only be achieved through the emancipation of the oppressed nationalities. The Poles in 1830 and the insurrections that followed claimed they were fighting ‘for our freedom and yours’, and after the uprising’s failure, Polish patriots went into exile to fight in almost every revolution in the 19th century world. A similar fighting diaspora went from Poland to all the European barricades after the collapse of the January Rising in 1863.

The Springtime of Nations, the revolutions of 1848, attempted to break up the Habsburg Empire into nation-states. In 1918-19, suppressed nationalities rose everywhere from the tomb to assert their ethnic right to statehood, on the basis of President Wilson’s 14 points. Once again, what was now called ‘self-determination’ was proclaimed to be a unifying principle, a universal good. Tell that to the Lithuanians after the renascent Polish state seized Wilno, or to the Hungarians after Trianon! Real fraternity between the post-Versailles states was in short supply.

The Resistance movements in Nazi-occupied Europe were seen by those who took part in them primarily as struggles to restore the independence of violated nations. By the time of Liberation, the mood of most of Europe – including the lands already controlled by Soviet forces - was one of radical left-wing nationalism, a commitment to the total renewal and restructuring of the pre-war democracies along broadly socialist lines. Optimistically, it was assumed that these left-wing democracies, once purged of their arms merchants and hereditary landowners and private capitalists monopolising ‘the commanding heights of the, economy would live happily together in a peaceful, co-operating Europe. I am talking here about an unrecognised moment in history: the spontaneous revolutionary mood which grew out of the Resistance programs in about 1943, briefly entered governments all over the continent, but by 1948 had been squeezed out of existence between Communist ruthlessness and the Western response to it.

The most recent episode at which the roots burst through the pavement was of course in 1989 and the few years that followed. The 1980s had already seen the European regionalist movement suddenly gathering conviction in the West, in post-Franco Spain, in the United Kingdom, in Belgium, Italy and even in France with its tradition of Jacobin centralism. Then the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that preceded and followed it led to spectacular disruptions at the nation-state level. Not only Cold War structures fell apart but also much older multi-ethnic states such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. It was at this moment, ironically, that the

European Community, reached what may prove to have been the apogee of its advance towards political unity; the 1991 Maastricht treaty which established the European Union.

I will come back to these apparent discords later. But it's time to interject a word about nationalism. As you see, I am interested in the dialectic between emancipatory nationalism, the desire to liberate one's country or nationality and achieve its freedom, and the longing for a Europe with supranational authorities and no internal frontiers.

My argument is that they don't necessarily conflict but often complement one another. In the decades I covered Cold War Europe as a reporter, I grew very tired of Western politicians, professors and bishops asserting that nationalism was the root of all evil. My own view is that of the great Scottish political thinker Tom Nairn. Nationalism is a Janus-figure. One face glares backwards into a mythical past of ethnic purity and golden ages. But the other looks forward into the future, determined to join the world and acquire enlightenment and modernity by breaking free of reactionary ties inherited from the past.

Back to Europe today, in 2008, with its Union of 27 (?) members. Where is it now heading? Nowhere for the moment, as Europe takes a rest, tries to digest its enormous recent accession of new members, and wonders what the future holds.

One narrative is over: the happy old fable about the states – exclusively western – which made the journey from ruins through economic miracle to supranational unity. Up to 1989, the tale of what went on in central and eastern Europe had been a mere bolt-on to the triumphalist fable. But now the centre of Europe suddenly moved - to the centre of Europe - to somewhere around Prague. Many politicians and journalists gave thanks for the reuniting of Europe. But when had it ever been united? This shape, the outlines of the EU in 2008, is new.

The mention of shape raises another definitional riddle – not When was Europe, but Where? If you visualise the geography for a moment, Europe is like a big fish-trap, with a wide aperture to the east but funnelling down to a mesh of peninsulas, isthmuses and inlets at the western end. For some four millennia, peoples have been swimming into the opening from the big spaces of Asia, to end up crowded into a struggling, flapping mass as the trap narrows into its Atlantic, Baltic and Mediterranean dead-ends.

But another way to look at Europe is to see it as a geometric impossible like an Escher staircase – in this case, a quadrilateral with only three sides. The sea tells us where Europe stops north, south and west. Nothing tells us with the same finality where Europe ends to the East. If Bialystok in Poland is in Europe, why not Grodno just across the Belarus border? If Grodno qualifies, why not keep heading east through ‘European—looking’ cities till you reach Vladivostok on the Pacific –

is that an 'Asian' city? Its *Strassenbild* – street scene – is a lot less Asian than that of London or Wolfsburg.

So Europe in time is 'not yet', and Europe in space is, as you might say, open to suggestions. All the same, we are very much aware of this contraption and aware that it is in motion – going somewhere, though at a slower pace than before. There is a relative pause in the drive to political integration, a pause to digest the colossal bolus of a dozen new members in less than five years. So what have been the main directions taken by this monster since the days of the Common Market Six, 50 years ago?

One track is socio-economic. I have already talked about the orthodoxy of Keynesian mixed economies and powerful welfare states which followed the post-war reconstruction phase in Western Europe. This broke down in the 1980s, as Thatcherism or Reaganomics spread over the European Community. By the time that new democratic governments in the ex-Communist countries were starting their transition from state socialism, privatisation and deregulation had already become the new orthodoxy in the West. The social and economic consequences are one thing. What interests me more is the steep decline of the existing European states as the redistributive centres of society, the guardians of living standards and of national culture. That decline had rapid consequences.

In western Europe, the withdrawal of the state from so many of its customary duties to its individual and collective citizens has undermined party politics. It's odd that nobody foresaw this. European political culture has been highly state-centred for at least 200 years. Nations without a state of their own fought desperately to acquire one. But now, if the state was suddenly to matter so much *less* in individual lives, it was natural that interest in controlling its policies through representative party politics should diminish too. Result: collapse in party membership, in party meeting attendances, in voting figures.

Was this a turn away from politics itself – a 'Bowling Alone' event or what the Germans call *politische Verdrossenheit*? That's an easy elision to make, but it's wrong. In Britain, for instance, the fashion for attending public debates and lectures on political topics has ballooned as participation in the formal democratic process has declined. It's the political structures, not politics itself, which are in trouble.

In post-Communist Europe, the impact of the 'small government' fashion has been even sharper. In the first years after 1989, countries like Poland were sold an export version of Thatcherism far more radical and merciless than the British reality. But, as Tony Judt writes in his admirable book 'Postwar', : 'The much anticipated passage from capitalism to socialism had been theorized *ad nauseam* in

academies, universities and coffee-bars from Belgrade to Berkeley; but no-one had thought to offer a blueprint for the transition from socialism to capitalism'. (p.685)

The result was that no social-democratic system, no stable mixed economy on the model of western Europe's 'Thirty Glorious Years', emerged in the post-communist zone. (Ireland, too, skipped that phase, and its incredible 'Celtic tiger' transformation in the 1990s has been well described as 'Americanisation' rather than 'Europeanisation'.) Some countries plunged into the free market like going over Niagara in a barrel. Others developed corrupt hybrids of democratic institutions co-existing with an unreformed state sector owned by shady survivors of the Communist *nomenklatura* and the security police. .

Before 1945, east and central Europe had traditionally venerated the state not only as the natural expression and supreme moral authority of a nation, but also as the potential engine of social change. Then came Stalinist Communism, state-ist in a different way. I know the day is coming when revisionist historians will set out to modify our opinions about the Communist period in Europe. All I would say is that not everything that those states did between 1945 and 1989 was negative. With brutal methods, they fulfilled some of the hopes of pre-war nationalist intellectuals, especially in south-eastern Europe: they industrialised and educated backward peasant societies. The Communist intention was not to strengthen national independence: quite the contrary. None the less, they left many of these countries

with the basic technical experience and infrastructure which has allowed them to survive and sometimes prosper in a globalised free market world.

At the same time, the illegitimacy, repressiveness and eventually corruption of those regimes soon deprived the state of any pretence to moral authority. And that authority has not revived since 1989 – a tragic deformation for the whole region.

If the transitions had been steered by the plans of democratic governments, rather than by market forces surfed by kleptocrats, it might have been a different story.

As it was, and is, governments and politicians do not feel like agents of change but are commonly regarded as dishonest cliques out to occupy fine offices and fill their pockets. And a problem with downsized state apparatuses, as even British experience in the 1980s showed, is that the energy diverted from society and the economy flows into other channels. One channel is an obsession with control and security - more police with more powers. Another is the display of theatrical and assertive nationalism in foreign affairs.

The second track of development, which I already mentioned earlier, is also to do with the state. It's the challenge to established nation-states by regionalism and by suppressed nationalities. Among the Community members, only West Germany and Italy had a decentralised constitution in 1970. By about 1990, Spain, Belgium and even Jacobin France had regionalised, and the United Kingdom was backing reluctantly towards devolution for Scotland and Wales.

Here we come to the so-called 'Sandwich Theory' : that the old nation-state was leaking power at once downwards to increasingly autonomous regions and upwards to supranational European authority in Brussels. It followed that there was a paradoxical linkage. Regionalism would continue to expand while the process of political integration thrived, but when the integrating drive faltered, Catalonia and Baden-Wuerttemberg and Lombardy might see national governments trying to repossess their lost powers. That is precisely what has happened: the slowing and halt in political integration has also ended the apparently unstoppable march of regions towards something like sovereignty.

Why it happened is a matter of dispute. Catalans insist that there has been deliberate collusion between national governments to sabotage regionalism and to asphyxiate the EU's Council of the Regions. Others will see outside influences: the halt to integration caused by EU enlargement after 2004, the terrifying wars which destroyed Jugoslavia and which were [wrongly] read by outsiders as warnings against any further dismantling of multi-ethnic states, the general paralysis of imagination which fell over Europe after 9/11. But the truth is that the sandwich theory no longer works. Although EU integration has been stagnating since the mid-1990s, Scotland and Wales moved on to devolved self-government after 1997, Northern Ireland found a basis for power-sharing autonomy within the UK, Belgium disintegrated further, and the incremental creep of empowerment in

– for instance – the German *Laender* continues. Outwith the European Union at the time, Czechoslovakia broke up in 1993 to join the Union as two separate states ten years later. Out of Yugoslavia emerged Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro as independent states, with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo closer to the status of international protectorates. Scotland now has a government committed to independence; in Wales, Plaid Cymru is in coalition with Labour. It has turned out that the new academic theory of ‘agglomerationism’ - the future belonging to a few vast units – is wrong. Globalism, unexpectedly, provides the conditions for further proliferation and survival of small or even minute state formations.

So the process of state disintegration is going jerkily ahead in Europe, despite the slow-down in formal EU regionalisation. Does it connect to the surging anxiety about multiculturalism, another question-mark over the nation-state? Immigration itself is largely over, though you wouldn’t think it if you followed the European media. It’s the anxiety that is new, as settled immigrant groups multiply and as their locally-born children enter the mainstream community.

Fear of terrorism is not the real problem. Britain, France and Germany have been enduring varieties of terrorism for many years. It is small, traditionally liberal societies like Denmark and Holland who have shown loss of nerve, a fear for their very tightly structured and intensely imagined identity. It would be tempting to

guess that ethnic self-assertion - so-called 'petty nationalism' – is fuelling xenophobia and Islamophobia. But sites of regional and nationalist aspiration simply don't correspond to hotspots of racial or religious tension (the Balkans sometimes excepted). And neither do they correspond to regions with high immigrant populations.

What is emerging through the presence of these minorities is an expanding gulf between city and country. Immigrant communities in Europe now are overwhelmingly urban. In London between a third and a half of the population have roots outside Europe, and several English cities have Asian majorities. Contrast that with an English rural county like Shropshire, where over 95 per cent of the population is white European – and overwhelmingly English.

This pattern, repeated across Europe now, further undermines the image of the nation-state in which the capital city was supposed to be integral with, to distill the essence of, the territorial nation 'out there'. We revert almost to mediaeval patterns of cultural contrast, in which cities were the place where foreign merchants and craftsmen lived under royal protection, while a bleak mono-ethnic feudalism prevailed in the countryside. So where is the nation now? Should not the real successor to the nation-state be the city-state, or a federation of them? And the United City-States of Europe would run the fields and forests for the benefit of

everyone. If that is the baby this pregnant but merry widow is carrying, how interesting Europe will be!

To wind up, I want to step back and look at this Europe's relations with the outside world. When I say 'this' Europe, I mean the EU as it now is, chaotic in purpose, confident in behaviour. Will it ever become a countervailing great power, comparable in weight to the huge nation-states – China, India, just possibly a revived Russia - which will begin to dominate as American ascendancy wanes? I am sure that it will not. The EU now has a Common External and Security Policy (GASP in German). But it will never become capable of taking the hard, rapid decisions about external affairs, war and peace which a conventional state was built to take. Nobody can forget – though everyone would like to – how M. Jacques Poos of Luxemburg told the United States to stand away from Bosnia because 'this is Europe's hour'.

The trouble is that the European Union has locked itself into a position in which foreign and security policies are going to have priority for a long time. And that means that the nation-state members, who do know how to take such decisions, will prevail for a long time in the EU and obstruct further moves towards political unity.

This became inevitable when the EU admitted Poland in 2004. With Poland, the Union took on board a whole new complex of daunting problems which were always Polish preoccupations but now become European: the future of Ukraine and Belarus, the securing of energy supplies, the face-to-face encounter with Russian power which requires sustained courage and a cool head – neither very current in Brussels.

Speaking for myself, I absolutely understand and support these Polish priorities. But I am sad that they will keep the European Union under member-state control for at least the medium-term future, and prevent its natural evolution.

Here I dump the pregnant widow image (by the way, we never got to the question of who the father was?) Instead, I want you to envision the European Union as a sponge – a gigantic, golden sponge, squashy in texture, indistinct and changeable in outline.

A sponge cannot defend itself, it cannot shout ‘Off with her head!’ or ‘Invade Iraq!’. Instead, it exists as a colony of countless pores and entrances, inviting swimming creatures of every species to enter, feed, settle and raise their larvae. Every movement of the water is an exhalation and an inhalation, breathing out rich diversity into the ocean, breathing in new organisms to share and increase the host’s wealth.

Was there ever such a polity in the history of the world? No. Do I know who will protect this spreading, vulnerable sponge against predators? No, I don't know that either. But to me those are risks worth taking for a European future with no more frontier fences, no more weeping immigrant families being deported, no more tanks on the pavement, no more faces on television impudently summoning me to list my national values in order to qualify for citizenship. Let's have done with Europe's old obsession with rules, regularities, symmetries, schoolbook certainties and hard lines drawn on soft landscapes. Sponginess is beautiful.

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