

2. Caution: European Narrative. Handle with Care!

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Post-Brexit debates among my pro-European British friends – and almost all of my British friends have now become enthusiastically pro-European – make me feel again, after so many years, like a foreigner in a country whose political language I have yet to learn to decipher. I am mystified by how personally people take the outcome of the referendum. Some even feel obliged to apologise, not just to Europeans in general but even to German Europeans – quite unlike what I thought it was to be British! One thing that I used to admire about the British was what I perceived as a pragmatic, detached, empiricist rather than idealistic attitude toward matters political, *sachlich*, as we say in German. Instead I now see a sentimentality, a collective emotional soul-searching that one normally associates with other countries. In Continental Europe today, a growing number of people find it quite reasonable to ask if the European Union, or what has become of it, is still the right kind of political organisation for Europe as an international community; many doubt this and say so. To them, if a Member state came to the conclusion that the EU has ceased to be functional and decided to exit from it, this would not be the end of European civilisation; a different kind of union might then have to be invented, and this would be all there was to it. Not so in Britain, it seems, where the question of EU membership has become a question of collective identity, even of moral decency, national as well as personal: who are we, and who am I? Are we, am I, sufficiently 'European', presumably meaning tolerant of difference, civilised, welcoming to strangers of all sorts, or are we a society of nationalist 'little Englanders' for which one must be ashamed – xenophobic, racist and all this?

Not that Brexit did not look a bit eccentric from a Continental perspective. If the EU was in fact overly centralised, suffocating self-determination and democracy in its member states, for which there is a lot to be said, this would have least applied to Britain, with its rebated financial contribution, its numerous exemptions from European social policy, its non-membership in Schengen and, most importantly, Monetary Union, and its promised release after a vote to remain from both the 'ever closer union' requirement and the obligation to pay social benefits to Eastern European immigrants. Other countries, like Greece, Italy and Spain, would have much stronger reasons to exit than Britain, which in many ways was no more than a half-member anyway. Moreover, there was never a sustained effort on the part of UK governments to have the deficiencies of the Union, as they saw them, corrected; all they ever asked for were exceptions and, after they had got them, let the Union be as it was. Why did they leave then? Perhaps because, where the British did influence the direction the Union took, for example when it aborted the Social Dimension and the integration process was narrowed to the completion of the Internal Market, the Union became a less attractive place than what it might have been, giving the British working class, in particular, good reasons to get disaffected with it.

Feeling utterly incompetent to say something meaningful on the European or non-European identity of the British or the English, I limit myself to a few comments on a related subject, that of 'narratives' of and on Europe as a whole – stories about what 'Europe' is or should be, where it begins and ends, and what 'values' it stands for. Of those I have encountered quite a few over the years, including recently when 'pro-European' politicians began desperately to search for new, more effective historical justifications of their version of a European political compact. The point I want to make is that such stories are not necessarily innocent only because they are about Europe and not about individual nations, and that they are also by their very nature opportunistically adaptable to the politics of the day and the needs of the powers that be. Thus when I went to Gymnasium in the 1950s and 1960s, for nine years of Latin and six years of Greek, we learned about the Persian Wars, from Xenophon to Herodotus, and our teacher was adamant that the story we were working hard to translate and understand was about the eternal battle of 'Europe' against 'Asia', a battle of freedom against servitude, of democracy against tyranny, of 'us' against 'them' – 'them' having more recently become Russia, aka the Soviet Union, and communism. Don't fall behind the ancient Greeks when it comes to defending Europe against the Asian hordes!

Of course the story was more complex than that. ‘Europe’ was also and at the same time divided between ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’, ‘culture’ standing for Greece and ‘civilisation’ for Rome. Greece was vastly superior in literature, philosophy and science, but unfortunately too divided to form a strong unified state; Rome, for its part, was culturally sterile but somehow better at statecraft, warfare, road and bridge building and similar trivial pursuits. Later we, the German *Kulturvolk*, became the new Greeks, divided in hundreds of small fiefdoms, whereas the Romans returned in the form of the French, our *Erbfeind*, a unified nation-state always out to invade and subjugate us, and for centuries able to do so until Bismarck gave the *Kulturvolk* the *Nationalstaat* that it deserved, to unite culture and civilisation in a Europe in which civilisation would sooner or later have to be subservient to culture. Of course there had recently been a little accident on the way to our common destiny, when we temporarily changed the story and Europe became the home of the Aryan race, claiming its rightful place under the leadership of the Führer. While this was a regrettable aberration, even though one strongly committed to a united Europe, essentially there was no reason to worry – in the long run the *Kulturvolk* would be back, and this would be for the better for Europe and everybody else.

Narratives like these are easy to construct, some historians specialise in it, and so do ideologues of all sorts. Typically inspired by power wielders and distributed through their means of communication, they are associated with political projects likely soon to turn out more or less sinister. The good news is that their shelf life is limited. Given the complexities of history any such narrative must be selective – which opens plenty of doors for politically useful distortion while it also invites effective revisionist critique. Together with changing conditions and interests, this requires them to be continuously rewritten. Still, the temptation remains apparently irresistible on the part of rulers and their regimes to try and institutionalise politically expedient accounts about ‘us’, taking possession of our emotional attachment to the places, the people, the music, and the languages, dialects and accents through which we have become who we are, and which connect our sense of identity – one can also say: our desire for a place where we can feel at home – to a political purpose that more often than not has good reasons to eschew critical scrutiny.

As I said, even the most skilfully designed collective identity narratives are unlikely to live long since their subject is simply too big – too diverse, too convoluted, too multifaceted, too contested. A lot of

brute power is required to make such a story stick – power that is not available in a democracy. Take any European nation-state, especially today when there is immigration. For example, try to imagine a post-colonial ‘narrative’ of the UK equally acceptable to post-colonisers and post-colonised. Germany, of course, is an even more difficult case: will immigrants, in particular from the Middle East, own up to a German historical identity, a concept of self in which the cultural and civilisational catastrophe of the Holocaust will always and inevitably have to assume a central position? I suggest that a shared *Gedächtniskultur* is impossible to install in a pluralist society in which all groups can claim equal value for their particular experience and any attempt to impose an obligatory common consciousness will be seen as authoritarian interference with personal liberty and dignity – not to mention the deplorable condition of the teaching of history in German and, I suspect, also British secondary schools where Henry Ford rules supreme: history is bunk! If there is at all a desire for a common story about where one’s political community comes from and what has formed it and keeps it together, it today clearly takes second place behind investment in marketable skills leading to ‘careers’ in societies integrated above all by norms of correct consumption as spread and enforced by ‘social networks’ and similar devices.

What applies to a European nation-state applies even more to Europe as a whole. ‘In unserer reflexionsreichen und rasonnierenden Zeit’, to quote Hegel, the aspiring authors of a hegemonic European *Erzählung* are likely to spend their time fighting with each other. Is Europe the home of democracy and freedom or of fascism, slavery, and industrialised mass murder? When did ‘Europe’ begin, and where does it end? Is Russia part of Europe? Or Turkey? Is there a border to Asia, and if so, where is it? ‘Der Islam gehört zu Deutschland’, according to a former German President – does it also belong to Hungary or Serbia, then, and if so, in what sense? A wide variety of stories can be constructed on those themes, provided one is willing to be sufficiently selective. But why should the kind of selectivity that would be favoured by an English-speaking, cosmopolitan-minded intellectual elite be privileged over the selectivity preferred by a Palestinian immigrant living in Duisburg, Germany – if they care at all – or by a French writer who happens to be a connoisseur and aficionado of French 19th century high culture? I suggest that as long as there are no power instruments available to a European political class by which to impose a unified European history on a yet-to-be-forged European society – the kind of toolkit that the French state was able to use when turning peasants into

Frenchmen before and after the lost war against Germany in 1871 – there is no chance that such questions can ever be settled.

This does not mean that there was no demand for a common account of what Europe is and what it means to be European. For some time now, when referenda on EU-related matters began to go wrong, ‘pro-European’ technocrats, not normally friends of literary constructivism, have been calling for a new ‘master narrative on Europe’ – a re-vamped *Große Erzählung* appealing to the hearts of those whose minds were unable to comprehend why free markets and supply-side economics were good for them – as though such stories could like commercial advertisements be invented ad libitum to serve a present purpose. (Indeed in the German language, the spectrum of meanings of a word such as *Erzählung* overlaps with that of *Märchen*, or fairy-tale: ‘Du kannst mir viel erzählen...’) Note that the strategic objective here is to blur the distinction between Europe as an emotional home, a place of individual and collective identification, and ‘Europe’ as a political construction, more precisely, the ‘Europe’ of the EU – enlisting the former to reinvigorate a political project that has increasingly fallen into disrepute among a growing number of its supposed beneficiaries. No search for historical truth here; narratives as demanded by Merkel, Hollande, Juncker and company are nothing but instruments to be replaced if necessary by other instruments until finally one does the job – just as, in the words of a member of the European Commission after the Treaty of Maastricht had failed to pass a national referendum, we’ll keep repeating the vote until the result is right. Can this work?

Considering that United Europe may be the last sacred political object for a good part of Europe’s liberal-cosmopolitan middle classes, it might indeed. Even some of the most sophisticated and often cynical students of political life allow themselves to wax sentimental when it comes to ‘Europe’ – for them a dreamland, as immune to evidence-based criticism as a religious faith. Perhaps one reason why ‘Europe’ tends to advance in some circles to the status of a civil religion is that it can be presented as a historical departure from past sins of nationalism and colonialism. All that is and was wrong with national politics is or will be right with its supranational replacement: ‘Europe’, to quote Jacques Delors, as a location for the optimism of the will superseding the pessimism of the intellect – and indeed a place where such optimism can be claimed to be morally obligatory given the disasters of the past.

The convoluted history of the EU, its permanently changing, ever more enigmatic institutions and the successive 'narratives' called upon to provide it with legitimacy, has apparently not been reason enough for many to dissociate their sense of 'Europeanness' from the politics of 'Europe' and its 'integration'. For a while united Europe was to be supported because it was a source of shared prosperity; since 2008 this has become less than plausible. Another promise was democracy; this was discredited with the advance of technocratic neoliberalism, as the EU turned into a liberalisation machine for the political economies of its member states. In the post-social democratic 1980s and 1990s, the Grand European Narrative featured a 'European Social Model' to oppose American neoliberalism – a specifically European capitalism, softer and with a human face, as embodied in Delors' 'Social Dimension', to be attached to his main project, the Internal Market, once it was completed. The theory Delors invoked to make his narrative plausible was that people cannot love a market, so for a market to be viable it must be supplemented with social solidarity – in other words, with a welfare state. For a while this was good enough for selling the EU and its newly adopted supply-side economics, even to British trade unionists – who at the 1988 TUC in Bournemouth greeted Delors with a rousing rendition of 'Frère Jacques'!

Today, 'Social Europe', the 'European Social Model' and the 'Social Dimension' of Europe are effectively deleted from the Union's self-presentation. Now, with hindsight, everyone can see that it was never clear what exactly these slogans were to mean: was it something that the welfare states of EU member states were supposed to have in common – which proved to be very little – or was it a set of supranational European institutions yet to be created to complement, preserve, make compatible or take the place of national welfare states – all of which turned out to be impossible. Britain under Thatcher was the leading opponent of efforts to embed the European market economy in a European welfare state, and when New Labour was in power, 'Social Europe' as a concept was altogether dropped from Eurospeak. Meanwhile national 'social models' were gradually sucked into a unified neoliberal economic order of continental dimension, sustained by national governments and supranational institutions deliberately insulated from political-electoral pressures. This holds in particular for European Monetary Union, before and even more so after the financial collapse of 2008. Currently the national remnants of the democratic welfare state continue to be hollowed out by the 'four freedoms' of the Internal Market, together with unremitting pressures from the European Central

Bank and the European Council for 'structural reforms', such as cutbacks in public spending and legislation to make labour markets more 'flexible'.

Thus a new story is needed, and now the flavour of the day is the EU as the wellspring of peace in Europe, in the postwar years just as now and in the future. But again this is easily recognised as yet another myth. That there was peace in Europe after 1945 was due to the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany, the division of the Reich into four, five or six parts (depending on how you count), and the integration of West Germany into NATO, with its new army of 420,000 placed under Allied command. It is true that the European Coal and Steel Community reassured other European countries, in particular France, that German *Schlüsselindustrien* would not again be used for producing tanks and artillery, unless of course under NATO supervision. And it is also true that the European Economic Community assured Germany of access to foreign markets for the products of its oversized manufacturing sector and the raw materials it needed – making self-sufficiency ("autarky") as unnecessary as the military conquest required for it. As to Europe as a whole, however, the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON were just as important as the United States, NATO and the European Economic Community, founded only in 1958, in maintaining the European part of a cold peace based on what was then called 'Mutually Assured Destruction', the quite appropriate acronym being MAD.

Later, progress in European integration, mostly economic, helped Italy and Austria work out their disagreements over Südtirol (although for most of the time Austria, committed to 'neutrality', was outside the EU), just as British and Irish EU membership may have contributed to a peaceful settlement of the two countries' long-standing differences. Also, the EU arguably kept Belgium from breaking up, and in future may help Serbia, Croatia and other states on the Balkans, to live together with reasonably open borders. But apart from this, the two nuclear powers that are (still) part of the EU, France and Britain, never felt inhibited by their association with a European 'peace project' from engaging in remarkably frivolous military adventures in places like Libya and Iraq, with or without American encouragement. And recently, with the return of tensions between the United States and what is now Russia, the EU has, under German leadership, faithfully executed its assigned role in the American geostrategic effort to pull Ukraine into the 'Western' ambit, in order to cut Russia down to size, with the result of a new militarisation of international relations at the border between Western and Eastern Europe. Interesting how similar today's peace narrative,

enriched with a European liberty story organised around the marriage *pour tous complex*, has become to the Persian War 'freedom versus slavery' story of my Greek teacher of old.

Official EU narrations of European identity are designed to anchor a more or less well-conceived set of supranational institutions and a historically specific geopolitical project, both subject to permanent change, in people's emotions and affections – under their skin, as it were. We should forcefully resist any such attempt. States, national, supranational, subnational, come and go, as did the small and pleasantly unpretentious West German state that existed between 1949 and 1990 in which I grew up. States are, at best, secular devices for the maintenance of order, to the extent that this is at all possible, and must be repaired, rearranged or discarded if they fail to do their duty. There is nothing sacred to them, unlike perhaps to human identity. Sentimental stories dressing up a political regime as more than a fallible human creation are to be considered with utmost suspicion. Gustav Heinemann, the third President of the Federal Republic of Germany, in office from 1969 to 1974, was asked by a newspaper reporter whether he loved 'our state' (having resisted the Nazis and resigned from the Adenauer cabinet in protest of German rearmament, he was suspected by the Right of insufficient patriotism). Heinemann answered: 'I love no state, I love my wife'. That's the spirit. 'Wife' may mean more here than a person, but it can never mean an ongoing project of state-building plus market expansion glorified by a 'master narrative' put together in its support by public relations specialists.

As I said, many of my British friends and colleagues seem to feel violated in what they see as their European identity by the vote of their fellow citizens to resign from the EU. I think they are making exactly the kind of mistake that the designers of the 'European narrative' of the day want them to make: confuse a set of political institutions aligning a selection of European nation states in a neoliberal common market with Europe as an international community of jointly produced diversity, a way of life, a civilisation, a culture, and if you will a home. In doing so, they contribute to the sacralisation of a worldly institutional edifice designed to do worldly duty for some while imposing the costs on others. Actually they could know that the EU as it stands, and in particular its core, the European Monetary Union, has long become a political and economic disaster that urgently requires deep restructuring if it is not to do even more serious damage to the European peoples and their peaceful co-habitation. Brexit may have helped make this clear even to some

of the Euro-fanatics outside the United Kingdom, although their capacity to learn is limited. Brexit may therefore in fact be a pro-European act of great potential significance. Moreover, if there is any normative political principle that is indeed deeply European, then it is that as a citizen of a European country, and of the European world we have inherited, you are entitled to disagree with your government, and even with the structure of the state through which that government undertakes to govern you, and still retain the right to be considered a patriotic citizen, of your country or, as the case may be, of Europe. In fact, sometimes being pro-European may demand being 'anti-European' in the meaning of the term administered by those who are currently driving the 'European project' against the wall.