

El salto 18-91

Useful illusions, no longer useful

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In the midst of the Italian crisis and with the Brexit *ante portas*, Emmanuel Macron staged a veritable orgy of First World War memory. This time it was not victory that was being celebrated but peace, although the real theme was “Europe” and the role of France in it. Relentlessly the myth was spread, with the help of the European establishment’s *bienpensants* of all kinds, including the German philosopher Habermas, of the European Union, founded in 1956, having secured Europe after 1945. In fact, of course, it was the Allies and the Soviet Union in particular cutting defeated Germany in four or five pieces, depending on how you count, thereby settling the “German question”. Regardless, now “Europe”, meaning centralized technocratic supranational government out of Brussels controlled by France or Germany or both, must be “strengthened” or else the European land wars of the nineteenth and twentieth century will resume.

Nobody was impressed, certainly not in France. By mid-November a popular uprising of hundreds of thousands of French citizens blocked traffic all over their country, in protest of a new tax on gasoline levied to pay for the Macron tax cuts for the rich and beautiful (which, needless to say, had done nothing to create the jobs and higher wages promised to ensue). Merkel, on whose support Macron has early on staked his survival, was and is not in good shape either. Invited to join the peace show, she played along, warning of war in Europe started, presumably, by the new “populists”. The Italian and British disasters notwithstanding, the motto was, as always, “more Europe”, whatever this means. Macron was flown to Berlin to address the Bundestag in a ceremonial Sunday session on Memorial Day, to outline again what is now called by the establishment press his “vision for Europe”, which remained however as vague as it always was.

That Macron's "vision" has not become clearer since Merkel's reelection in September 2017 has to do with Merkel's rapid decline as a political power. Now her days are finally counted, following two disastrous regional elections a year later. Under her, the German government can make no meaningful commitments on any of the big European questions, even less so than in the past. Merkel's party is watching closely, so she doesn't spoil the prospects of its next Chancellor-candidate (who still remains to be selected), while the SPD, her partner in a coalition that is now far from "grand", must do exactly this. All Merkel can do is look Macron deep in the eyes and allow herself to be kissed by him whenever a camera is in sight. Beyond this she can try to continue what she was always best at: buying time through symbolic concessions delivered in unintelligible public speech impossible to nail down to anything concrete. The result are illusory expectations that can be satisfied only by encouraging more illusory expectations – a political Ponzi scheme that is now finally about to come apart, first in Rome and London, then in Berlin, Paris and Brussels.

One example of Merkel style politics is her response to Macron's pet project, a separate budget for the Eurozone, supposed to end all its troubles: low growth, austerity, growing international disparities. Merkel could and should have told her friend in the Elysée that neither she nor her successor, whoever it will be, will get anything close to his "vision" past the German parliament. Instead, not to attend the peace fests empty-handed, she had her finance minister agree to a Eurozone budget nested into the European Union budget from 2020 onwards, leaving open the question of all political questions, Who gets what and how much and from whom? Nothing on size, funding, spending – apart from that it will be under the authority of all 27 member states, including those outside the Eurozone. While this adds insult to injury, Macron is too weak at home to say so in public.

Similar on the "European army", Macron's, and Habermas's, other favorite. Merkel, of course, declares herself to be all for it, but only "ultimately" and provided the European army fits in with NATO. But what does this mean, and who is the "European army" according

to Merkel to fight anyway? Who is to pay for it? What about the French nuclear force; will it be integrated? Of course not, no French President could agree to this. And what about France's permanent seat on the UN Security Council; will it be "Europeanized"? The same answer – but neither in France nor in Germany is there any public discussion about this, in both countries in order to allow the other to continue to pretend to believe in the unbelievable.