

Some Thoughts on the Advent of European Society

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More people than ever before are speculating nowadays about the nature of Europe, its culture, its society, its political constitution, its prospects and destiny. It is, in a way, a thankless endeavour, for when people begin to theorise about the possible «essence» of a given society (or its culture) we may be fairly sure that something in it is either already gone or in serious danger of going. That seems to be the case with that entity which we all appear to cherish but cannot define very well: Europe. It is an entity which happens to constitute, for many of our citizens, the widest possible frame of reference, lying beyond locality, occupation and nation, as the true source of whatever they seem to have been able to learn in terms of education, taste, ethics and public and even private conduct.

Our current search for the precise features of European society is at the core of the very plight which confronts that society, its policy and its culture. It is also part of a contemporary obsession with «identity». Over recent decades, the search for identity (for roots, uniqueness, distinctiveness) has become one of the central themes of the age, both here and abroad; that is, beyond the confines of Europe. The search for identity is a theme, a preoccupation, that has invaded and coloured all our speculations about Europe, including, first and foremost, our often unexpressed anxieties and fears about its future at this crucial moment of its modern history. Yet we ought to know better in this respect: a relentless search for identity, as such, leads nowhere. It is the quintessential task of Sisyphus. Roots and Ultimate identities must be left where they belong, in the realm of mystery, else we must see them used and abused by ideologies, nationalist or otherwise. Identity is averse to rational analysis, though religion, art and poetry may sometimes convey it superbly.

The endemic difficulties of any search for identity have been compounded by the fact, in Europe's case, of its own projection upon the rest of the world. The massive world expansion of our culture, carried to every corner of the Earth by a handful of seaborne Western-European empires, by the Russian empire towards the East and then by the United States from its North-American home everywhere has, paradoxically, undermined its uniqueness, its identity and its roots. Moreover, recent cosmogonies and philosophies of history that somehow told the story of our core traditions and claimed to foretell their future and destiny have either been disgraced or considerably discredited. There seems no way of reconstructing a comparable way of looking at world history any longer. It looks as though any interpretations of the same ilk that may dare to appear will be given short shrift by most of us. General futuristic conceptions (in the past nearly always likened to vast cosmogonies and philosophies of history) have also been discredited, though, on a practical level, Europeans, like all Westerners and all peoples having assimilated our classical political formulas, still continue to be futuristic. With due caution, futurism is our very condition as

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animals of modernity: economists, politicians, industrialists, educators, ecologists, physicians, architects, scientists, must all «plan ahead». It is the legacy of that powerful belief in progress that has characterised one crucial and easily identifiable component of our culture since the dawn of Enlightenment up until yesterday. Such faith may have all but disappeared in its original form, but it has left us with a need (or a compulsion) to plan the time ahead, it has left us the imperative to be futuristic. It is, however, a residual futurism. We are futurists without a grand design.

Perhaps some of you will think that, if no particular identity can be established, we can at least agree that, looking back on our common history (both in the distant past and during recent times, including contemporary events and the rise, at long last, of a united Europe) we do possess a considerable degree of community of destiny. Solemn though the idea may be, it is simply true. Yet the question is that such past and present community of destiny shared by most Europeans may cease to exist over the next decades. Faced with cosmopolitanism, mass immigration from the rest of the world, the relentless spread of the mass media, telecommunications, global interdependence, demographic and ecological imbalances, world trade and industry, transnational social inequalities and such like, European culture may become even more blurred in its features than it is now, until it loses all its remaining distinctiveness; more blurred, not because confronted with an alien culture, but because also confronted with its very own, in the shape of its own ramifications and consequences, as re-cast, perfected or transformed by the peoples who, once upon a time, fell under its spell or were the direct offshoots of its relentless world expansion.

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Curiously enough, these developments –which some would without hesitation call threats– are taking place precisely at the historical juncture when the process of political, cultural and economic unification in the European continent finally gathers momentum, and when many historical undercurrents and social trends leading towards the eventual rise of one single European society are finally coming to the surface. Here is the paradox: the possible end of Europe as a distinct civilisation takes place during the advent of Europe as a political, economic and transnational unit. However, in as far as the preoccupations and diagnoses of intellectuals and social scientists can be considered an indication of trends to come in the life of a culture, it does look as though Europe will survive, as a unique civilisation, faithful to its chief traditions, in the near future.

All too often we hear that social scientists tend to notice and react to events only when they have come to fruition or, if such events pose some sort of threat, only when it is already too late for anyone to do anything that may put a stop to their pernicious development. Although some of us may think that gatherings such as ours ought to have taken place at much earlier date, thus anticipating the future turn of events, it seems to me that the familiar harsh judgement about the social scientists' supposed lack of awareness about certain crucial social processes is, in the case of Europe, notoriously unfair. If it is true that, for the most part, European social scientists have preferred to work within the framework of their national societies –which appeared more easily accessible for them as clearly-bound units of observation, and for which statistical material, linguistic unity and already gathered data and research funds were more readily available– it is also true that many among them have long been engaged in work of a truly European scope.

A «European vision» and a European standpoint have not been absent in the recent past from the preoccupations of many of our colleagues. Trans-European migrations, economic integration, the rise of Community law, transnational social inequality, welfare state provisions throughout Western Europe, the consolidation of democracy in entire regions of the continent, the fluctuations of the labour market and the nature of industrial conflict in different countries, as well as many other trends, have been amply and often successfully analysed across Europe, or across substantial parts of Europe, by social scientists for quite a long time. For their part, European studies institutes have proliferated and are to be found today in many university campuses and elsewhere. Moreover, many inter-university programmes, such as Erasmus, are now being intensively used by young and budding social scientists in many parts of the continent. Meanwhile, political, economic and cultural history has been steadily losing its former nationalistic undertones. European historians have been recovering –all too slowly in some cases– from the nationalistic bias imposed upon them by the demands of their respective nation states and the cultural assumptions of the inherited ethnic romanticism, ethnocentrism and particularism in which many of them were once steeped.

These hindrances notwithstanding, universalism as an attitude of the enlightened mind, and the methodological imperative of studying mankind rather than one of its many tribes in not-so- splendid isolation, has never left the social science disciplines as cultivated by Europeans: after all, both these approa-

ches to reality were born and bred here, as essential components of our cultural tradition, though, by definition, no monopoly upon them can ever be exercised by a single nation, school or methodological approach. Rationality, science, humanism and respect for empirical proof are only in a historical sense defining traits of our civilisation. They have always been highly exportable commodities and have now spread well beyond the countries directly peopled by the European emigrants and colonizers of the past.

The uneven political development of Western Europe, where the formation of one single democratic territorial continuum has been a very slow process indeed –lasting from 1945, when the totalitarian regimes fell in Italy and Germany, until 1974, when Portugal, Greece and Spain began their transitions to liberal democracy– has been a serious hindrance for the growth of what one may strictly call a common European consciousness. For its part, the Eastern half of the continent was suddenly and forcibly cut off from the rest of it in the name of an ideology which was, interestingly but unfortunately, largely based on the awful distortion of specifically European traditions of equality, emancipation, solidarity and progress. With the collapse of the Stalinist dictatorships and police states in the East from 1988 to 1992, some of the prerequisites for further unification have been achieved. Despite tensions and continued confrontations –particularly in the Balkans– a space and framework that does not exclude any part of our continent from participating in our common endeavour as a civilisation is beginning to take shape, though there is still a long way to go. Yet the feeling some have that a truly united Europe is suddenly and finally within our grasp is wholly justified. There is no longer any reason whatsoever for us not to meet and work together across national borders as members of one single and larger community within our shared universe of discourse.

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There is a widespread feeling today that Europe has, quite unexpectedly, materialised before our own eyes. By common accord, Europe was, before, a mere geographical expression, whose shared cultural features were never strong enough to make into a real unit. Yet, an awareness of its deeper and substantial cohesion despite its often tragic inner cleavages and confrontations has been strong among many of its scholars in our times. Weber, Simmel, Pareto, and Freud are early representatives of such contemporary awareness. After them, from Karl Mannheim to Raymond Aron and Norbert Elias the unitary approach has made its voice heard. Some important structures may have differed from society to society and, certainly, political and economic developments have diverged or collided with each other, but Europe, both as a single civilisation and culture and as a community of destiny for its various peoples, was a fact of life. A fact, however, apparently contradicted by the bitter confrontations of politics, war or ideology. Often enough, though these were as considerable within nations as between them, almost none could be circumscribed to one single society. Such confrontations, however, have now undergone a severe attenuation over the last few decades. Consequently, during the very recent past, the process of political, economic and cultural unity has gathered sufficient speed to force a substantial number of intellectuals and social scientists to address themselves to the implications of the rise of one single society, one single polity and one single economy within Europe. Among such implications we must count some which are of a somewhat theoretical nature. As, in their case, theory matters, I shall refer to them here.

The «convergence/divergence» issue is one paramount theoretical problem that deserves some attention, for its presence within our discourse has immediate consequences for the kind of practical attitudes we display. Put very simply, it refers to the confluence (or otherwise) of our several societies into one single society. By the same token, and in the kind of world we now live in, the issue refers also to our possible confluence (or otherwise) with the societies around ours, or with those with which we maintain close links, be they of mutual dependence or, as some would still put it, of the centre-periphery kind.

This is not the place for a discussion of the debate (often heated) that has surrounded the issue over the last decades. Suffice to say that traditional theories of modernisation (theories, for instance, of industrialisation, or of the irresistible worldspread of the capitalist mode of production) tended to assume a progressive (if often unsteady) convergence of all societies that fell under the «Western dynamics» or civilisational pattern. Some of these theories went even further than that. Such was the notorious case of the «industrial man» theory, which posited the rise of one human type whose predominant presence was concomitant with that of all advanced industrial societies, regardless of certain other traits, such as national traditions and local moral or religious values, or the once all-important divide between state socialism and Western capitalism. The «industrial man» thesis, together with certain notions about a supposedly necessary attitudinal complex made up of individualism, a thirst for personal achievement, and other (essentially

Western) anthropological traits, brought psychological interpretations into the picture. The notion of an inevitable convergence of all European, and by extension, Western, societies, under the ever-expanding logic of industrialism, capitalism and achieving individualism thus became popular at the macro, micro, and individual levels. Under continued modernisation, the rest of the world might follow.

Serious criticism of these assumptions (the height of whose popularity may be situated in the fifties and sixties in the United States and in some North-Western European countries) came first from those Marxist or neo-Marxist scholars who developed various theories of «uneven development», «dependent development», the «capitalist world system» and such like. For their part, however, many non-Marxist anthropologists and sociologists of several persuasions also seriously questioned the universal convergence thesis. In the case of Europe, the growth of intra-European comparative analysis at class, economic and political levels from the mid-sixties onwards, showed the vast disparities that existed between societies and also within societies. Italian social scientists, for instance, were quick to insist not only on the persistence –under conditions of economic growth– of the North-South divide in their own country, but on the actual increase of traditional or new national disparities. Comparative research across Europe also showed that, due to migrations, different state policies, ethnic loyalties, and other factors, no undifferentiated single society could be said to be rising in Europe despite moves towards a common market and greater political unity. For some time it looked as though the old «convergence» thesis had become untenable, even within the space of a small continent with the characteristics of ours. Suddenly the assertion of progressive convergence seemed naïve, even unintelligent.

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The advent of 1993 and what it means in terms of real European integration seems a good reason to grant both positions –the convergence and the divergence theories– their due. For one thing, there has arisen a broad commonality of conditions throughout many parts of Europe. Thus, the arrival of mass affluence and the expansion of the welfare state (often enough under the aegis of socialist or socialdemocratic policies) has reduced the salience of class as the most crucial component of social conflict and political alignment in several countries. In the same countries, the logic of industrialism has certainly not abolished social classes. On the contrary, in conjunction with the dynamics of capitalism, it has produced new kinds of poverty and loss of privilege, as the several cases of de-industrialisation abundantly prove. Yet it leads towards an entirely new set of problems, wholly shared by most European nations, albeit in differing degrees. Likewise, though many social trends vary from country to country or region to region –population growth, immigration flows, economic development, the demands of ethnicity, etcetera– others, such as the development of a technological culture, the spread of corporate power, the increase in European-wide institutions and in stable interactions at all conceivable levels–must be leading towards a substantial measure of consolidated convergence. These latter trends may, again, be far from homogenous, but only the most obstinate «anticonvergence» observer will assert their irrelevance to the rise of a relatively unified and distinct society that can, without unduly ideological distortion, be called Europe.

Convergence is not uniformity. We ought to be able to assume the ambivalence and the complexities of our situation in respect to the varieties of the economic, political and cultural dimensions of Europe while taking into account the strong common elements that make integration possible and even necessary. For one thing, convergence is not a figment of anyone's imagination or ideological wishful thinking: it is obvious that many European societies have either become relatively stable liberal democracies or are in the (often painful) process of moving in the direction of pluralistic parliamentarism, constitutionalism and human and citizen's rights. Effective moves towards political, monetary, tariff and market unity have been taking place since the 1958 Treaty of Rome and will reach a historical peak when 1992 comes to a close. Relatively similar welfare state policies, juridical guarantees, higher education curricula and many other provisions arise everywhere. The European Social Charter and the social policy programmes of the Community will encounter difficulties in their application, but they exist and will be implemented. For another structural differentiation between countries and regions continues to be strong. Not only distinctive inherited structures persist. New ones also arise. To give just one glaring example, immigration from the «outer» societies seems to affect each of the host countries differently. Great Britain has received immigrants from India, Pakistan and the Caribbean; Spain from North and Western Africa and Latin America; France from Algeria and other parts of Africa; Germany from Turkey; the Netherlands from Indonesia; not to speak of the internal European migrations from South to North that preceded the current influx,

or the wave of migrants, now just begun, from the European East, that also affects each Western European society differently. Each country has received or receives its immigrant component from different areas, cultures and religions and in vastly varying numbers. Some, like Portugal, have assimilated great numbers of immigrants in a rather exemplary manner, worthy of the best European traditions of tolerance and respect for any foreign citizen. Others have been (or are being) less faithful to our alleged moral codes of public conduct. Whatever the views we may express on the matter, it is clear that there is, on the one hand, a Europe in the making and, on the other, a Europe in the «unmaking». There is convergence, but there is also divergence, fragmentation, centrifugal tendencies. A general move towards inner-European cosmopolitanism is frequently challenged by the hostility of sectorial, state or regional interests. Ethnic conflicts still flare up and take their awful toll. Meanwhile, of course, the transformation of our own position within the world at large continues to take place.

It is in the light of these simultaneous currents and countercurrents, of this essentially shifting and ambivalent situation, that European citizens must look at the structure and dynamics of their continent today. Unless we look at Europe from that perspective, more as a bundle of tensions and uncertainties than as a smooth process moving towards some marginal plenitude, we shall betray our best traditions of critical thought. The loss of irony about ourselves, our countries and our beliefs has plunged us in the past into awful conflicts against each other. Let us hope that we do not lose it again. Nor that tragic sense of life which has been the most characteristic trait of our culture through the ages. Let us hope that the new Europe now emerging will continue to live by reason as well as by a sense of tragedy tempered with irony.

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