

In search of a new spirit for Europe

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1.

We are all, by now, happily marching towards an integrated United Europe. And like all long term historical marches, it is a march towards the unknown. Nobody can be certain what this future Europe will consist of and no one can be sure whether or not an ideologically compact and culturally homogeneous sociopolitical whole will eventually emerge. The modes and processes by means of which the consolidation of the new political entity might lead to a relative symbolic withering away of separate european nationalisms remain not only unpredictable, but also highly reversible. And much more to the point no one can convincingly claim that the colourful future we are glimpsing at shall prove to be "better" than the allegedly sad world we have already abandoned.

Thus, the question "why" we should strive towards an integrated European system remains unanswerable and unanswered. It is certainly no accident that most current discourses aiming at European legitimization are consciously vague and loose. Indeed, in most cases, the normative and ideological foundations of "europeanist" discourses seem to be trapped in a limited number of rhetoric devices. On the one hand, the well rehearsed but indigestible banalities about common heritage, values and traditions are tirelessly repeated, despite the obvious solidity of arguments claiming that whatever these traditions and values may consist of, they can be better preserved and developed within the separate societies that have been systematically nourishing them for many centuries. On the other hand, pragmatic statements underlining the actual necessity to define all sociopolitical entities in ways ensuring that their critical mass and collective power will guarantee their viability within a growingly competitive world system are certainly convincing.

But this line of argumentation inevitably leads to the further question whether any kind of projected common power may provide adequate normative foundations for the new European idea. It is a fact that the logical and value content of the ongoing process must remain open.

However, this inherent normative vacuum is hardly surprising. Such questions may seem superfluous, or even facetious in a world totally dominated by instrumental rationality and fetishised productive maximisation. It would seem that value loaded critical introspections are henceforward becoming as unfashionable as Hegelian ironies. And thus, to the extent that history is still obliged to mask its proper evolution as a logic in action, it is necessary that voices pointing out to the ever lurking *ruse de l'histoire* should be either silenced or discredited. This of course is the main preoccupation of all those who insist in professing the "end of history". And in this sense, it is always better to play it safe: the oncoming European reality is characteristically represented as an irreversible social and political "externality", to the effect that the construction of Europe is generally considered as an obvious value in itself, to be accepted and venerated as uncontroversially and automatically as all received ideas. In the best case, the few remaining cynics may state that exactly like democracy, a united Europe is only the most acceptable among bad solutions. But such criticisms are clearly innocuous. Once more, cynicism seems to be the most effective discursive antidote for irony.

2.

To the extent that this is true, it hardly encourages. Indeed, it is becoming harder and harder to propose any kind of "solutions" in a world marked by the globalisation of most socioeconomic issues, the spectacular homogenisation of material and cultural practices, the dominance of world markets and the proliferation of technological self-sufficiency. However, the very fact that the epochmaking European experiment should be systematically

rationalised on the mythical basis of common heritage, common value systems, common projected power and common historical destinies can only contribute to a further de-substantialisation of the only undoubtedly "common" European value system, which may be summed up as the unfinished political and philosophical project of the Enlightenment. And, precisely, this is the historical "catch": even if shallow rhetorical exhortations seem to serve short term political preoccupations, a symbolically impoverished European project may well prove to permanently disable its own vague purposes. To the extent that European integration will not be able to convincingly present itself as the undoubted political incarnation of social progress, the whole venture will suffer in terms of significance and will be impaired in terms of solidity. Historical systems lacking ideological and normative depth are intrinsically fragile and unstable.

Indeed, it may be plausibly claimed that in order that a new Europe should end up by "existing", it must, in Ernst Bloch's terms, be already planned and represented as "that-which-does-not-yet-exist". If it is to catch collective imaginations, the immense symbolical and political European edifice must be thought of in terms of a concrete positive utopia called upon not simply to continue and reproduce, but to transcend and radically modify "that-which-already-exists". It should be kept in mind that no great historical projects were ever implemented through a simple synergy of vested forces and interests. Alliances and formal consensual processes are as easily destructured as they are structured. And this is the reason why, above and beyond their immediate causes, all epoch making political transformations have been invariably founded on new ideas, new significations, new discursive practices, new collective fantasies and new normative constructions. The "glorious revolution", the French revolution, the Russian revolution, the American revolution and the Chinese revolution have ended by clinging to their names as universally significant "revolutions" not because of similar "technical" details in the process of their historical appearance but because of their convincing normative

radicality. Their world wide effects and resilient ideological symbolisms were nurtured by the fact that they could be convincingly represented as immense normative “ruptures” in respect to the past by opening up radical perspectives for the future.

This may still be true. Despite its increasing loss in credibility, the eminently modern notion of “common progress” remains the strongest possible idealisation for “common action”, the main rationalisation for any kind of organised political community and the only notion that can lead to the relative mitigation of the allround entropic effects of the dominance of self-centered individualism. Thus, any common project towards progress must be embedded in discursive confrontation with an “existing” situation which asks to be changed in all urgency. Progress as a social phantasy can only be defined in terms of answering a fundamental imaginary “need”, represented as a painfully felt social shortcoming, a visible normative lack, a gap in social values. Indeed, a happy and self-sufficient social entity would be able to totally dispense with the concept of progress. It is only societies struggling against their present collective inadequacies and “problems” that are pushed towards the development of phantasies and plans about the necessity of change, novelty, experimentation, reform or revolution. And in this sense, a radical future can only be thought of in terms of a projected radical “difference” in respect to what is seen as being already there.

Thus, it is precisely this element of “radical difference” that is lacking in all current rationalisations of a European project still dominated by indifferent technical and institutional discourses. The obvious “needs” for monetary stability, geopolitical integration, economic growth and cultural continuity are congenitally incapable of energizing hesitant institutions or of inspiring fatigued social imaginations. If it is to be convincing, the new vision must therefore arm itself with “additional” discursive and ideographical weapons. The European idea will

have to be represented as something obviously and radically different.

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But this is not all. The coveted difference must be defined in a double perspective. While the proposed political Europe must be clearly differentiated from all "other" non European polities and projects, it also must, at the same time, be equally clearly distinctive in respect to its already existing national components. A new positively utopian European fantasy must consequently found its discursive necessity and desirability against and in spite of the power of both major normative projects of modern times. Both self centered nationalism and abstract universalism will have to be superseded by means of a newly definable "we" which can be neither the "we of all men" nor the "we of all nationals". And this is probably the major discursive trap lying behind the continuing normative hesitancy of europeanism.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that the European political venture is defined by means of an original need to transcend the most powerful political idea of modern times: the idea that the territorial organisation of popular sovereignty and political democracy is axiomatically coextensive with a postulated national "cultural homogeneity". If the new concept of "society" was originally called upon to support the idea of a transhistorical Volksgeist as the sole legitimate "subject" of autonomous political projects, this fundamental notion must now be revised both in its discursive crystallisation and in its normative self-evidence. It should however be kept in mind that the epochal and soothing idea of "naturally closed societies" was mainly responsible for the ideological foundering of all oecumenical ideas produced by the Enlightenment. It is no accident that ever since the end of the 18th century, all transnational political and ideological projects,- including ventures as disparate as the Soviets and esperanto,- were finally defeated by nationalitarian rationalisations.

And this is probably the main historical challenge the founding fathers of Europe will have to face. British insularity, French cultural sufficiency and German economic arrogance are only partial manifestations of the intrinsic force of national ideas. In this sense, the creation of a new "Europageist", simultaneously deprived of national symbolisms and oecumenical values, but nevertheless capable of inflaming imaginations and demanding civic obedience will have to be implemented against all received ideas. And thus, clearly, a venture lacking both the solid philosophical background of Kantian universalism and the imaginary appeal of Herderian particularism will have to invent new discursive forms.

All the more so that the reality and representation of the "globalised world system" set the scene for the inevitable question about the normative criteria underlying the distinction between the world at large and Europe. Even within ancient and well structured national sociopolitical formations it is highly debatable whether or not the issue of "resisting" the tendencies towards universal convergence of social practices, organisational patterns, political ideologies and life styles can or "should" be dealt with. And this same problem may obviously prove to be even less manageable within a wider Europe, where most if not all historical particularities which gave birth to the myth of cultural homogeneity are totally lacking: a nominal collective entity which is not even endowed with a common language, a common religion, a common history or common symbols, is called upon to think itself as culturally specific within a world increasingly consisting of universal villages.

This is the reason why the new project cannot afford to remain normatively vague. In J.J. Rousseau's words, if the new social contracts signed in Maastricht and Amsterdam may be able to "persuade", they cannot possibly hope to "convince". As things stand, no European citizen would accept to sacrifice his interests for his new country, nobody would be prepared to fight or to die in its name. Nobody really believes that, even if it is inevitable and highly desirable, the future E.U. is much more

than a new arrangement which is called upon to protect and promote enlarged vested interests. In this sense, like most current visions, the European vision seems to be consciously embedded in an ideological and imaginary minimalism. Even if unanimously accepted, political Europe is represented as an emerging functional socio-economic plan, which, in the best of cases, will prove beneficial for the integrated but symbolically separate national economies. It is certainly true that most dedicated Europeans are to be found among those that have been able to plan their own personal interests, activities and prosperity as a function of the everexpanding and evergenerous European institutions. From a sociological point of view, "Europolatry" may be seen as the current equivalent of a diehard "statolatry", minus, of course, the symbolical aura.

The obvious inadequacy of dominant "economistic" European rationalisations is enhanced by a further antinomy. As was the case with all emerging national States, the institutional and legal reality of Europe precedes the elaboration of legitimisation patterns. However, in full opposition to most newly organised nation States, the European system lacks the ideological jurisdiction to "freely" build its coveted internal social homogeneity. All national cultural spaces were constructed through a deliberate invalidation and dismantling of pre-national references to any "other" imaginary form of social cohesion. This is strictly prohibited in the present context. And thus, for the first time in history, a coveted sociopolitical entity can not and may not implement the social conditions of its reproduction by means of a planned and systematic ideological violence. Whatever its eventual content, the new European imaginary will have to freely evolve "from below", with a minimal and subsidiary assistance from controled central ideological mechanisms. As things stand, there can be no organised European ideological apparatus. The European idea will be implemented without a common educational policy, without a common army, without a common bureaucracy, without common symbols and even without a common cultural

policy. And this intrinsic limitation in the forms and processes of ideological inculcation is highly original. To all intents and purposes, the imagined European community must march ahead despite the fact that it conspicuously lacks the manipulating power of its former integrated counterparts.

4.

Thus, the original question about the possible normative content of the European political project remains open. All the more so that all current and generally acceptable sociopolitical norms can hardly be thought of as specifically European. Even if their implementation is more often than not faulty and insufficient, ideas like the need to protect abstract political, civil and even social rights, the demand to further democratise social institutions, the necessity to promote economic development and social welfare or the will to rationalise the organisation of the State and public institutions, are all currently included in political agendas all over the world. Despite their immense significance, these ideas clearly belong to the realm of "imaginary banality". Indeed, the very fact of their universal acceptance explains the limited value of their primary symbolic power. Established rights are only fought over when they are felt to be openly challenged. And in this sense, Europe can not possibly define its specific political and ideological particularity in terms of its "democratic", "liberal" or "developmental" quality or build its *raison d'être* on the assumption that it is a projected haven for Law, human rights and political rationality. The exemplary power the new polity must lie elsewhere.

This brings us back to the question of the possible ingredients of all projected utopias. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to assume that all major sociopolitical projects must define themselves in relation to recognised social and ideological "problems". And in turn, "problems" are discursively pinned down through a specific crystallisation of fundamenal social "needs". If so, things become clearer. In contemporary societies, collective

phantasies cannot be mobilised otherwise than on the basis of current social representations of the main social and political shortcomings. And things being what they are, it is neither a default in the overall European “standard of living”, nor the professed “lack” in democratic legitimation that are generally felt as acute social problems. The main elements of the new social utopia must thus be discovered in the immediate fears, despairs, hopes and prospects touching the entire European population. And these, I believe, can be meaningfully summed up in three separate if interrelated chapters.

1. On the one hand, the most obvious common preoccupation of European individuals must be seen as a function of their increasing personal and social insecurity. The cumulative results of growing social exclusion, institutionalised flexibility of labour forms, conspicuous explosion of homelessness, proliferation of crime and violence, and, most of all, the ubiquitous specter of an unmanageable unemployment seem to have penetrated collective imaginations to an unprecedented degree. Indeed, the “technical” notion of emerging “two thirds” societies hardly corresponds to the general shift in social representations brought about in the 80s and even more so in the 90s. Henceforward, contemporary societies are almost totally impregnated with an ubiquitous sense of fear of social degradation and decline. And this new development is probably the most important massive sociopsychological mutation of a post war era previously marked by a pronounced welfarist optimism.

2. It is true that dominant liberal ideology cannot possibly afford to “forget” the importance of such phenomena. But even if acknowledged, these “problems” and issues are deliberately “de-politised” and “de-socialised”. To the extent that individual initiative is the object of an unprecedented and unmitigated veneration, most social antinomies and shortcomings are growingly considered in the light of “personal inadequacies”. In this sense, the ubiquitous notion of self-help is only the reverse of the coin. The ideology of self-centered individualism may

freely deal not only with the victors but also with the defeated. Herbert Spencer is back in force. Henceforward, it is the "victims" themselves that are mainly responsible both for their insecurity and for their fate.

Thus, whatever the definition of collective welfare and whatever the representation of an overall public "responsibility" for the mitigation of the debilitating effects of the free market, all proposed measures and "solutions" may be safely seen as partial, technical and in the last analysis subsidiary. Insisting on the primary social aim of the State in terms of creating the (always unequal, selective and principally unfair) conditions for promoting individual welfare is tantamount to a general symbolic degeneration of the public sphere. Political discourse is thus being gradually disinvested from all forms of stricto sensu collective preoccupations. Hence the de-substantialisation of the representation of politics in general. Hence also the conspicuous political indifference and abstention. Indeed, it may be presumed that the impact of the prevailing ideologies of "self-help" and "self-improvement" can only exacerbate the sense of insecurity, frustration and indifference among those who feel that they can neither help nor sensibly improve themselves. Political mobilisation can not possibly flourish on sheer despair.

3. The declining credibility of political discourse is further enhanced by the "internal" evolution of political institutions and organisations. The very notion of a self-instituting democratic representation of conflicting interests, classes and ideas is challenged in its elemental components. Widespread political corruption, the gradual political convergence on largely technicised issues, the decline of mass parties and labour unions and the irresistible emergence and representational crystallisation of "non-political" forms of power, have all contributed to the proliferation of unprecedented internal contradictions. Very characteristically, most political discourses insist on the functional and symbolic necessity of politics while sadly acknowledging the limited capacity of political

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intervention at the same time. This is a central discursive antinomy which touches the very heart of politics. Indeed, if the future is to continue to be shaped as a “residual” response to “exo-politically” produced financial and technological developments, the very notion of a “collective political decision”,- and by extension of anything that might be seen as collective and public,- must be gradually considered as intrinsically powerless and historically dated. Henceforth, what may be seen as lying outside the scope and jurisdiction of deliberate collective action will simply have to be accepted for “what it is”. The greatest of neo-liberal triumphs is that it is “reality” itself that is becoming symbolically depoliticised.

5.

In this sense, any new political project, including the construction of Europe will have to overcome the limitations brought about by the general desubstantialisation of the notion of politics. Under the prevailing conditions of imaginary political minimalism,- and its counterpart of utter residual political pragmatism,- the congenitally theatrical character of all political confrontation increasingly refers to issues that have already been decided upon “elsewhere”.

And therein precisely lies the challenge of a new European project. In order that the European idea should be invested in flesh and bones, the notion of politics as such must reemerge from limbo. “Reality” cannot continue to be seen as intrinsically “run” on the basis of exo-political norms and criteria. And if Europe is to be created by its new citizens, this cannot possibly happen if political agendas continue to mainly focus their collective activities on issues like the protection of the currency, the defense of the economy against the menacing “tigers” or even the “resistance” of the european culture against the intrusion of exoeuropean, i.e. U.S. practices and values. What is urgently needed is a radical redefinition of the jurisdiction and

scope of the political process and of the concomitant capacity of European institutions to implement a new social utopia. → |

However, such a venture supposes a fundamental readjustment of the political agenda. It will have to be clear that the "political" is willing to recuperate most of the semantic and normative space which has been gradually "abandoned" to exopolitical decision making. Widely felt social problems and anxieties will have to reenter the centre of political planning. Politics and political decisions cannot possibly confine their intervention powers and will to objects left over after exopolitical decision making processes have sovereignly pontificated on the limits of the political.. If something, it is exactly the contrary that must prevail. It is only through democratic political consensus that the fluid distinction between the respective social competence of private and public interests may be circumscribed.

To give a single example, the issue of unemployment does not only concern its specific victims. Full employment and full protection are among the fundamental normative foundations of contemporary equitable societies. Consequently, if we continue to consider unemployment as a "technical" problem which can only be faced with subsidiary methods calling upon rational self-interests and outerdirected motivations of concerned individuals, the political decision making process must accept that bowing to the professed superior competence of the market forces is historically inevitable. And it is precisely this principle that reflects the structural subsidiarisation of the political sphere.

Incidentally, the same is true of what one might name the "politics of individual security". Security of work, life and survival can hardly be seen as the sole concern of those who have accidentally been deprived of it. And if it taken for granted that all Europeans suffer from the everpresent spectre of insecurity, if in other terms the most conspicuous social shortcoming of all contemporary societies resides in the ever lurking presence of fear, social menace and exclusion, then the

most urgent of political priorities must be to publicly offer this imagined institutional security to the entire population. The only possible positive utopia of our times resides in providing universal paths of escape to the modern agony of material degradation and isolation. And this can only be seen as a primary value which may be pursued regardless of the cost it might imply.

However, such an overall political project obviously raises wider issues. It is inevitable that the question of the normative hierarchy between the primary value embodied in general social protection on the one hand and maximising economic performance and welfare on the other must be reconsidered. The fundamental relation between what we call economics and what we call politics can by no means be taken for granted to the effect that economic considerations must be seen as unconditionally prioritarian. And herein precisely lies, I believe, the most important rallying point of what might be seen as the new Left. If social justice, equity and individual security must always succumb to the insatiable demands of maximisation, the sum total of political practices will continue to be held captive in its performative straightjacket. And this is certainly not what most people dream of, in spite of systematic ideological manipulation. It is most probable that, given the chance of a real choice, Europeans would democratically opt for accepting slower rhythms of economic growth, or even a no growth period, if this implied that their lives and environment could be adequately protected and securised.

In this sense, the normative relation and hierarchisation between individual welfare, consumption and initiative on the one hand and collective security and life quality on the other will have to be radically reversed. The everlurking conflict between the diversification and extension of the so-called public goods, including personal security and unreserved public assistance, and the full protection of individual property and economic rights will have to be reconsidered in its normative kernel.

But this is not all. Furthermore, the prevalent forms of the social organisation of production and distribution cannot be taken for granted. Once more, liberal recipes have succeeded in silencing an old debate. It is thus necessary to raise, once again, the fundamental question of the values and criteria by means of which it may be decided whether a good or a service “should” be produced as a marketable commodity or “should” be organised as a public good. This is an eminently political issue, and must be acknowledged as such. And to reduce the question to a preestablished set of “productivity norms” is also a political assumption which hides its enormous ideological implications behind a supposedly neutral “technical” terminology. It is probably true that even more than the “objective” universal commodification of most goods and services, it is the narrowly technoeconomic argumentations against public goods that is mainly responsible for their normative and symbolic demise.

It is thus essential that the respective realms of the polity and the market should be reconsidered. Truly there can be no question of abolishing the market. But there is also no intrinsic reason to accept its unconditional dictatorship. This precisely should be one of the main if not the main object of political debate. The same is true in respect to public educational policies, increasingly thought of in terms of the “human capital” and competitive expertise they serve to produce and growingly detached from all preoccupations with the pleasure and self-gratification brought about by the simple access to knowledge, of environmental policies in constant conflict with vested private interests, and even more obviously with economic and financial policies obliged to submit to the conditions imposed by national and international capital.

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All this is well within the objective possibilities of a E.U, which will be large and powerful enough to be able to freely redefine its internal political priorities and eventually even to renegotiate

its economic and political relations with the rest of the world. All the more so that, for all their spectacular eclipse, the traditions of class struggle, collective action and permanent political mobilisation are still much more alive on this continent than anywhere else in the world. As a geocultural area, Europe is still the only perspective sociopolitical entity where the values of social equity, equality, security and justice may still be able to counterbalance the fetichisation of individual wealth. And last but not least Europe is sufficiently developed, both technologically and economically, to be able to pursue a reevaluation of fundamental sociopolitical choices without facing imminent collapse. This time, socialism in one "extended" country might prove to be historically possible.

But this is a necessary but hardly a sufficient condition for a deliberate return of the political in its full sense. The historical role of the new European Left can only consist in demanding an immediate reopening of all political and ideological fronts that have been closed for many years. The objective conditions are obviously fulfilled if the fact that 11 out of 15 European governments are nominally socialist means anything at all. But reviving the credibility of "socialism" is much more difficult than obtaining nominal access to political power. Socialist governments have to further endow themselves with a socialist will to project a new Europe worthy of the long efforts invested in its creation. And this supposes that all closed semantic fields should immediately be reopened. Like socialism, Europe cannot be really constructed otherwise than through a "revolution", both on the institutional and on the ideological level.

I shall now conclude. My main point was that if a new Left is difficult to conceive of without the wider sociopolitical and socioeconomic foundation provided by the E.U., the opposite may also be true. Indeed, a "radically different" European polity can only emerge through a "radically different" European policy, which will strive to overcome the deep allround effects of misery, de-politisation and mistrust. Instead of soothing guns, flags, family portraits and essentialist myths, our newly

constructed collective “mirror” must be able to reflect convincingly adequate responses to our most flagrant material fears and insecurities. In this sense, if the credibility of a new European utopia is not established without delay, nothing can protect the new edifice from the inevitable decay that comes with imaginary immobilism. Nothing can capture the imagination of a growingly disillusioned mass of people if fundamental needs are not brought back to the forefront. And this can only be obtained if coveted institutional novelties can march hand in hand with a fundamental normative renewal of the basics of political discourse. “Third” or “other” ways can only lead to the blurring the issues and thus the indefinite adjournment of radical decisions. But time won may also be time lost.

Consequently, if the institutional setting of the new Europe may take decades or more to crystallise, the profile of a new European image and spirit must be immediately launched. The resilience of mirrors relies in the imaginary solidity of collective reflections. And there is nothing as solid as the dream of a “possible” positive utopia. Indeed, more than ever today, we must act in the hope that if a stuttering socialism has not spoken its last word, the same is true for a chattering Europe. To paraphrase Nicos Poulantzas, it may well prove that “democratic socialism will be European or will not exist”. Which can also be read as “Europe will be socialist or will not exist”, otherwise than a fragile conglomeration of vested interests. Europe needs a left political vision as much as the Left needs an political European vision.