If There Is to Be a Democratic Europe | Cornelius Castoriadis

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Cornelius Castoriadis

Before answering the questions posed by ACTA, it seems to me to be indispensable to elucidate three themes that order or should order all political reflections on present-day Europe. Within the limits allowed, this can be done only in a brief, therefore dogmatic, way.

A. Almost all human societies have always been instituted in heteronomy or, what is the same thing, the closure of signification. The institution of society (the law in the most general sense of the term) is posited there as intangible, since originating in a source that transcends the living society: God, gods, founding heroes, the ancestors-but also, as a modern version, the laws of Nature, of Reason, and of History. At the same time, the magma of social imaginary significations, which through its institution holds society together and creates a world for itself, is closed there: it furnishes an answer to all the questions that can be posed within its framework but cannot itself be called into question. And individuals are raised and educated there through these laws and these significations in such a way that challenging one or the other is, for those individuals, unthinkable-psychically and intellectually almost impossible.

In known history, this state of affairs has been truly ruptured only in Europe, and this has happened twice: first in ancient Greece and then in Western Europe. It is only in those two societies that one observes the birth, and the re-birth [*renaissance*], of democratic political activity as a challenge to established institutions under the aegis of the question "*What is just?*" of philosophy as a calling into question of the inherited significations under the aegis of the question "*What is true?*" and, finally and especially, the conjunction and mutual fertilization of these two activities, even if it has almost always remained indirect. It is in those two societies that the project of individual and collective autonomy is born, each being inconceivable without the other.

In this sense, Europe has ceased for a long time to be a geographical or ethnic entity. The word *Europe* connotes the state of a society in which people and communities are free in their thinking and in the positing of their laws and are capable of limiting themselves on their own [*s'auto-limiter*] in and through this freedom.

B. Yet the project of autonomy has been broken down in Europe-and in the whole "Western" zone of the world-for several decades. Europe has also been the society that has given birth to capitalism, a demented but efficient project of unlimited expansion of pseudo-rational pseudo-mastery to be exercised over nature and human beings. Contestation of capitalism and, more generally, of an institution of society characterized by the domination and exploitation of some by others, was broached by the workers' movement, but such contestation was confiscated by Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism so as to culminate in the most monstrous forms of totalitarianism, which is also a European creation. The collapse of Communist totalitarianism in the countries of Eastern Europe, which has deceptively appeared as a triumph and justification of capitalism, reinforces for the time being the apathy and privatization of populations, which are already, as a function of the

degeneration of the workers' movement, settled into a life of consumerism and televisual stupefaction.

Contemporary Western Europe, like all of the West, is characterized by the waning of political and social conflict, the decomposition of political society which has been fragmented into lobbies and dominated by bureaucratized parties, the spread of irresponsibility, the accelerated destruction of Nature, of cities, and of a human *ethos*, generalized conformism, the disappearance of the imagination and of cultural and political creativity, the reign in all domains of ephemeral fashions, intellectual fast foods, and universal rubbish. **Behind the facade of "democratic" institutions, which are so only in name, European societies are liberal-oligarchic societies in which the ruling strata prove themselves increasingly incapable of managing their own system in their own well-understood interest.**

C. The constitution of the European Economic Community was undertaken, and remains dominated up till now, by political and administrative bureaucracies lacking any popular participation. So long as that is the case, the "Europe" that will result the reform will be a mere agglomeration of national capitalist societies overshadowed by politico-bureaucratic machinery, even further removed from peoples, that will become even more ponderous and irresponsible than it is today. **Only the emergence of a large democratic and radical popular movement that would also challenge the existing structures in particular States would be able to give another content to "European construction" and make it into a democratic federation of really (*effectivement*) self-governed political units.** My answers below to the questions posed are formulated under the hypothesis -as impossible as it might seem today- that such a movement will exist and will be victorious. Outside that hypothesis, the issue is, in my view, only of sociological interest and not of a political interest.

If the process toward European integration is reinforced and

strengthened, toward what pattern of integration should it head? What should be the predominant dimensions (cultural, political, economic, social…)?

What should be the fundamental units of political representation? The current States? The nations, with or without the State? Cultural communities? Regions?

If there is to be a democratic Europe, it can be founded only on self-government. With the dimensions of the social and political units of modern times, and in particular with a Europe of 350 million inhabitants, self-government requires the greatest possible decentralization and the institution of grassroots political units on a scale where direct democracy could actually function in an effective way. Direct democracy does not signify democracy conducted by polling or over the telephone lines of television stations, as the recent perversion of the term in France tries to make it mean, but, rather, the participation of all citizens in the making of all important decisions, and implementation of those decisions, as well as the treatment of current affairs by committees of popularly elected delegates who can always be recalled. The possibility of recalling delegates dissolves the false alternative between "representative democracy"-where "representatives" in fact dispossess of all power those whom they "represent"-and "imperative mandates"-where the delegates could be replaced by vote-counting machines.

The size of these grassroots political units should be of the order of, at most, 100,000 inhabitants (the dimension of an average city, a Paris ward, or an agricultural region of around twenty villages). Twenty or thirty of these units would be grouped together in second-level units (pretty much the size of present-day regions in Spain, Italy, or France). Those units could, in turn, be grouped together in "national" units, so long as the "Nation" retains its relevance, which would ultimately be united within a **European Federation**. At all those levels, the principle of direct democracy would have to

reign: all decisions principally affecting populations at a certain level would have to be made by direct vote of the interested populations, after information {is circulated} and after deliberation. So, for example, the federal laws would have to be adopted by federal referendum. And at all levels, the committees of popularly elected delegates who can be recalled at any time would have only subsidiary powers pertaining to the execution of popularly-made decisions and to current affairs. At all levels, the ruling maxim should be no execution of decisions without participation in the making of decisions.

It is clear that if a popular movement sufficiently powerful and radical to impose a democratic European Federation were to develop, it would create much richer and much newer forms of political coexistence and cooperation than those I am trying to outline here. This outline is to be taken only as an illustration of one possible concrete manifestation of democratic principles.

It is also clear that, contrary to what is happening now, the political dimension will have to be the central dimension of any effort at European integration. Without that dimension, "Europe" will be, at best, only a zone of economic unification leaving the instituted structures intact. Finally, it is also obvious that such a political change will not be able to take place unless it swiftly embraces the other dimensions of the institution of society: the economy, social solidarity, education, culture, and so on.

Do you think that there is a European culture? To put it in other terms, does the cultural diversity existing in today's Europe advance Europeanization or hinder it?

The unity of European culture since the Middle Ages is beyond doubt. But there has also been for centuries, as one knows, a development of national (or regional) cultures, going hand in hand with the triumph of vernacular languages over Latin and

the establishment of more or less “national” States. That has not prevented this developing diversity from being a tremendous source of mutual enrichment as early as at least the fourteenth century (to go no further back than Petrarch), and it has remained so, despite the rivalries, wars, and monstrosities perpetrated by some on others that have, up till now, caused only brief eclipses. On the level of philosophy and the sciences, there is but one European culture (even if, in philosophy, there is something like “national styles”). On the level of literature and the arts, one would have to assume that the reader is illiterate if one were to indulge in making an (in fact impossible) list of the cross-fertilizations without which no national culture in Europe would be what it is, and perhaps wouldn’t even exist. Just two points seem to me to merit particular emphasis.

The mutual fertilization of which I spoke is neither a sum of “influences” passively undergone nor an agricultural product of the European soil, nor the mechanical result of spatial proximity. Such proximity is but one external condition, which is in no way sufficient. Cross-fertilization has resulted basically from the active opening up of each culture and of each individual creative person to the other cultures and the other works produced in this zone, from a permanent awakening to beauty and truth created elsewhere. This opening is the key characteristic of European culture, and it goes far beyond the each time given spatial and temporal borders, as is shown at once by Europe’s unique relationship to its (Greek, Roman, medieval) past, which, through its continuous creative reinterpretation starting in the Renaissance has remained ever present, and by its also unique relationship with its spatially outer world. Of all the great civilizations known in human history, European civilization -and this is so already since Herodotus- is the sole one that has almost constantly (save for the interruption of the Christian High Middle Ages) shown a passionate interest in the existence and the creations of others. In contrast to the other great civilizations -

India, China, Japan, Islam- it has been the sole one not to have closed upon itself and the sole one of which it might be said that it has really wished that nothing that is human remain foreign to it. It is in this respect that one recognizes, beyond the very content of its political and philosophical creations, its universalist character.

On the other hand, it is clear that the development of Nation-States has gone hand in hand with a cultural closure at the level that depended on the State, that of general education, a level whose importance is decisive in any case and especially so because it is indirectly but powerfully orders peoples' political future. In each country, such education is centered almost exclusively around the country's culture and, more particularly, its "national" literature. It is characteristic, and distressing, that one can at present complete one's secondary-school and even university education in France (and I believe that the situation is basically identical in all European countries, not to mention the other ones) without having read a single line of Cervantes, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Kafka, or Dostoyevsky (whose names one will have, at best, simply come across in history classes). As for the Greek and Latin classics, there is no point in even talking about them. It is almost a tautology to say that a culture can exist only by being rooted in a living language and that the privileged vehicle of this language is literature. But it is absurd to proceed as if knowledge of this literature had to be accompanied by the exclusion of all the other ones (and the same thing could be said for the great extra-European works).

In conclusion, the cultural diversity of present-day Europe could stand in the way of the development of a European identity only if, unfaithful to the very spirit of European civilization, one continued to close educational curricula to everything that is not "national."

Will national communities without a State -as is the case with Catalonia, but many others as well- become diluted, or will

they be reaffirmed within a process of unification? What would the desirable evolution be, and in what ways could they participate in unification?

No one can respond to this question of whether stateless national communities (or even ones with a State) are going to be diluted or reaffirmed within a process of unification. But a democratic Federation, like the one whose features were sketched out a bit above, would most certainly involve a huge amount of facilitation, for these communities, to help them get organized with all the autonomy they would wish within the Federation. That said, the question of the desirable evolution of the existing national entities (with or without a State) brings up an inextricable knot of antinomies. The principle of individual and collective autonomy implies that every community that so desires in full knowledge of the relevant facts is to be able to organize itself in accordance with the political form it wishes to have (therefore also the Nation-State). But in another connection, this same political project of autonomy, which is addressed to every human being and every human collectivity, implies, through the universalism that is consubstantial with it, going beyond the imaginary of the Nation-State and reabsorbing the Nation into a vaster community that, ultimately, encompasses humanity in its entirety.

At the same time, in effectively actual historical reality, the imaginary of the Nation and of the Nation-State is far from receding and even seems, as is shown by the recent events in Eastern Europe but also all across the globe, to be reviving and reinforcing itself as the sole refuge for individuals who are atomized by contemporary capitalist society and disoriented by the collapse of the significations and values that characterize that society. Finally, we do not know, and we cannot even conceive, of a culture without roots in a concrete language that would be a living, everyday language and not just a commercial or administrative *lingua*

franca. The Hellenization of the eastern Mediterranean that began with Alexander, the Latinization of the western Mediterranean under Roman rule, and the Arabization of Islamized peoples after the seventh century offer some examples. (And the Swiss counterexample is not really a counterexample since, while Switzerland has politically been able to safeguard its unity for many centuries, culturally its three main parts have always been turned toward and nourished by the surrounding German, French, and Italian cultures.)

While English (or rather Anglo-American) is increasingly playing at the present time the role of the aforesaid *lingua franca*, it seems difficult to envisage an "anglicization" of Europe and impossible to accept the disappearance, as cultural languages, of such beautiful, rich and history-laden languages as are practically all the European languages extant today. While waiting for history to do its work, whose orientation and whose effects it would be childish to want to lay down or even to foresee, I would be a supporter of a solution that, still from the perspective of a democratic Europe, would frankly adopt as *lingua franca* of the European Federation, rather than some artificial language, a living one (and English seems, for several reasons, the best placed to play this role), whereas particular cultural linguistic communities would continue to develop.

Yet one could not conclude these few reflections without underscoring -on the occasion, as a matter of fact, of this last question- the importance of a major obstacle in the path of a European Federation: the tremendous persistence of the imaginary of the Nation-State, which makes it seem that the peoples already constituted in States are in no way inclined to abandon "national sovereignty," while the other ones are especially preoccupied with the idea of achieving an "independent" state form, whatever its cost and whatever its content.

So long as that is the way things are, "Europe" will be

reduced to a bureaucratic structure somehow or other heading up and overseeing the national States, and it will be futile to speak of “European integration”.

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