

GUEST EDITORIAL

Europe is a soil – not a machine *

It just so happened that in August 2005, at the Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, I had been asked to think up a closing event for “Making Things Public”, an international exhibition I had curated on the necessity to renew politics by allowing it to be, as we said, *object-oriented*.¹ That period corresponded, alas, with the French rejection of the European Constitution in May 2005. Already at the time I had been struck by the strange inability of my friends and colleagues to speak strongly not only on behalf of the European Union as a complex institutional machine, but also of Europe as ground, land, earth, a soil, a history, a material thing, an issue; in brief, a reality as obvious as what attached each of them to their own country. Why were they so timid?

In the fifteen years since then, the situation has worsened to a point that when people are asked to give their opinion for or against “Europe”, it seems that they never mean anything other than “Brussels”, by which they mean a system of administration, and not the land, the ground, to which they could have some sort of vital attachment, in the sense that they would be ready to defend it against its enemies. And yet, within each of their own countries, they know very well how to distinguish between critique of the government and the appeal to a country’s physical and historical nature. The attachment to Europe as a motherland or fatherland is still a feeling that we are forbidden to express. It’s there, however, in a thousand ways – but not in the open.

The Brexit palinode is an excellent case in point: when the question was asked in 2016 *in abstracto* in terms of *identity* (“are you for Europe, or for Great Britain floating alone?”), one set of responses was given. Three years later, when the question has finally been raised *in concreto* as a problem of multiple *attachments* to Europe as a practical and grounded entity, the answer is entirely different, and much more protracted. In other words, there exists a

* This Guest Editorial follows a presentation given at the 5th CML Rev. on Tour Conference, held in Paris, 12 Oct. 2019, and organized in cooperation with Sciences Po and Paris II – Pantheon-Assas. The Conference was entitled “A Cultural-Identitarian Shift in European Union Law?” The presentation, which included a declamation of the 2005 alternative preamble reproduced below, was part of the session on issues relating to the Environment/Sustainability.

1. Latour and Weibel (Eds.), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (MIT Press, 2005).

complete disconnect between what it means to feel European if you mean an identity or meaning a long, and constantly changing, list of attachments or belongings.

Hence, the problem arises of finding a way to reconcile the diffuse but very strong feelings of attachment to some sort of historical territory, and the traditional apology for the EU machinery (the usual clichés of “supranational solidarity”, “economic interests”, “eighty years of peace” and so on). At the time, I thought that a good solution, although a fairly hypothetical one, was to imagine what the preamble to the European Constitution might have been – that same European Constitution the French had failed to vote for. I fantasized that such a preamble might have had a similar influence on voters to what I call the “Brexit effect”: that is, it might have created a shift in how we speak about “our” common land – largely because it would have drawn on a much wider gamut of effects and feelings, and would have resonated with a much more vital set of groundings.

Fifteen years after this episode, the exercise seems even more necessary, since everywhere nation States are now in the business of pitting *their national identity* against the EU’s complex machinery, as if it were acceptable to appeal to culture, land, territory and *Heimat* under the pretext that these have more reality and more history than the hated “Brussels”.

No political aim, however, is more misdirected. First, because the “culture” in the name of which new nationalisms are clamouring for respect is most often a newly minted and very narrowly defined set of values, based more on folklore than on history. But second, because the very definition of the land in which this imaginary culture is said to have “deep roots” has become an abstraction due to the progressive rise of ecological mutation. Nobody knows today what it means to have roots in a soil if that soil is not precisely defined. Every day, belonging to a piece of land becomes more and more surprising, when climate, soil, water, animal life, plants, and insects and birds are taken into account.

Claiming to define a cultural identity without being able to defend the real material Earth on which such a culture is based, is asking people to move toward a country that is even more abstract than the hated neverland of “globalization”. To “defend one’s land” has taken on a totally new meaning and something that nation States are terribly ill-prepared, and especially ill-designed, to protect in isolation.

This is why it has become necessary to reclaim the call to belong to a *land*, but certainly not a land defined by identity or imaginary nostalgia; rather to a land, or rather an Earth, that is explored, day after day, for all the attachments we have with it. If those attachments are ignored or severed, “identity” will not lead anywhere. Fortunately, Europe as a thing, as a material reality, as a soil,

possesses the right size and the right history for this landing, away from the two abstractions of globalization, on the one hand, and a return to the imaginary protection of isolated nation States, on the other. If so many people dream of their *Heimat*, it might be a good moment to reclaim Europe as *our Heimat*.²

I am perfectly aware that preamble-writing is a strange exercise, mixing political philosophy and constitutional law. The CML Rev. Editorial Board has asked me to republish my fictional attempt of fifteen years ago, most probably to spur other writers to do much better.³ I have abstained from modifying anything in the original piece, the tone of which is hard to define. In retrospect, I would call it *castigated European narcissism*... I am not convinced I would sign it today, but it might be interesting as a token of a missed occasion and, possibly, as a pointer toward a task that remains even more indispensable today. (Mind you, it has to be declaimed, or read with a certain solemn tone of voice!)

The historical setting

Proud of our great inheritance from Greek thought to Roman law and the religions of the Book, we, the historic nations of Europe, have measured the planet, conquered temporary empires, established that the earth is round, defined universals for the rest of the world, but we have also unleashed the most terrible of territorial, colonial and planetary wars. Convinced of the greatness of our traditions, but fully aware also of the crimes committed in their name and of our relative decline from strength, we have solemnly sworn to unite our common yet different destinies in a political adventure without historical equivalent, so that together we can rediscover our part in that renewed globalization which we hope to pursue.

The future creation of a European people

We, the historic nations of Europe, ever divided by our interests, religions, cultures and languages, commit ourselves, despite and because of these divisions, to contribute, by every possible means, to the creation of a European people who alone, at a time we hope is near, will be exclusively qualified to vote for a real Constitution drawn up by a legitimate Constitutional Convention. In the expectation of that Constitution and with the intention of founding that people, we have resolved to sign this solemn treaty.

2. See "Heimat. Was bedeutet?" *Die Zeit*, 14 March 2019, pp. 12–13.

3. A French version was published in "Un autre préambule pour le traité européen", *Le Monde*, 21 Oct. 2005.

Redistributing the attributes of sovereignty

We, the historic nations of Europe, having largely benefited from the national State, yet having paid for its benefits by centuries of war, conscious of the rightful attachment of our peoples to their gradual acquisition of sovereignty, yet even more convinced of the changing and changeable shapes of the forms of public life, believe that we are being faithful to our peculiar histories in committing ourselves to the onerous task of putting in question and redistributing one by one each of the symbols and attributes of sovereignty, including those which concern our defence. We firmly believe that it is possible, despite changes of scale, to rediscover the sense of security and belonging which is indispensable to civil society.

The place of religions

We, the historic nations of Europe, having drawn great cultural and spiritual benefits from Christianity but having learned, from centuries of religious wars and unatonable massacres, all the advantages of tolerance and secularization, resolve to devise and defend institutions which, while recognizing the importance of established religions, will distance them from the public sphere and will allow newcomers, whom we wish to welcome, to rethink the nature of their attachment to their own faiths. Religions do not belong to the past, nor does the future belong to them; they accompany Europe in its age-old exploration of what comprises public space.

The role of economics

We, the historic nations of Europe, having invented political economy thereby revealing the source of previously undreamed-of prosperity, having unleashed, through capitalism, passions which have ravaged the planet, having committed, in the attempt to put an end to such ravages, yet more terrible crimes through the various totalitarianisms to which we have given birth, solemnly undertake to construct institutions which will restore to the realms of economics and politics that sense of measured values and goals which they ought never to have abandoned. Europe will truly embrace free enterprise when it will have recovered the freedom to seek the public good against the combined claims of the invisible hand of the market and the visible hand of the State to define the common good without public trial or debate.

The nature of ecology

We, the historic nations of Europe, having fruitfully overturned conceptions of the cosmos through the lightning advances of science and

technology, conscious of our prodigious inheritance from a long line of European scientists and engineers, but equally aware of the destruction caused by the idea of nature as a good to be possessed and mastered, solemnly undertake to find a new place for science and technology at the core of our lives so that we may learn to cohabit sustainably with forms of life with which we will henceforth share our political and cultural space. For too long we believed the planet could be modernized through the benefits promised by emancipation alone; we now commit ourselves to sparing it by adding the requirements of care and carefulness.

The boundaries of Europe

We, the historic nations of Europe, conscious that no geographical, ethnic, cultural or religious border will suffice to define the future people of Europe, yet also aware that only the sense of a common past will allow us to make a success of our union, resolve voluntarily to limit the boundaries of Europe to nations close to us who have directly contributed to the history of modernization, who have renounced the temptations of empire, and who for these reasons agree to commit themselves along with us to the invention of a new modernity. Only when the frontiers of Europe have been securely set, will we be able to participate anew, along with other emerging political entities, in the invention of a world order which Europe thought once too precipitately to define.

Europe and Enlightenment

We, the historic nations of Europe, convinced that no other part of the world contains such geographic and cultural diversity, such miracles of artistic splendour, that without a redistribution of the attributes of sovereignty we shall be condemned to perish or to submit to empires present or to come, firmly believe that, by sharing sovereignty, Europe will achieve the influence which in centuries past it vainly sought to attain through conquest and supremacy. Having revolutionized the world by the first Enlightenment, which its own history has since profoundly obscured, only a Europe confident of itself can once again undertake its historic task: to enlighten others by first enlightening itself, and to set an example, this time with greater justification, of what humanity, on this planet, could achieve.

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