

Should we defend Europe or defend the EU?¹

Bruno Latour

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When we speak about Europe, 99% of the time we mean Brussels and the EU. This always surprises me because for me 'Europe' designates also a country, a landscape, a history, a tragedy, an adventure, a responsibility, in short thousands of attachments that can in no way be reduced to an organisation, one that de Gaulle called a *machin*, a 'thingummybob'. Limiting Europe to the EU is like mistaking France for the State. Every French person, as far as I know, is perfectly capable of distinguishing criticism of the government from the feelings they have for France. So why the hell is it so hard to tell the difference between our hostility towards the European machine and our multiple attachments to Europe as a country? Once we could easily distinguish the government of a nation from what was called by the somewhat out-of-date term, *homeland*. Why can't we distinguish the EU, on the one hand, from what we might call 'the European homeland' on the other?

Why? You dill, it is because there is no such thing as European identity! Despite their best efforts, the gnomes in Brussels have never been able to forge 'a common ideology', as they say. But I'm not talking about PR or ideology campaigns, the starry blue flag, or the 'supranational framework', I am talking about everyday life, history, and especially the territory, the ground, in a specific place where you are living and earning your daily bread.

I'm also talking about a place that is threatened on all sides. You may not feel attached to this European homeland, but then I have to ask you what you feel when you look around at the threats from the Putins, the Erdogans and the other Trumps, not to mention the unexpected departure of the English—deep down still European—and the looming shadow of China weighing on the continent that you occupy the other end of?

Don't you have a slight urge to defend this place where you live when attacks are raining down on it? Of course, no one would die for the EU, but isn't the European homeland something worthwhile defending? Unless you think yourself strong enough to defend yourself all alone, or even worse, if you have given up on the whole idea of defending yourself.

But are we really going to go back to defending 'European civilisation', the Europe superpower? No but rather the Europe *superweakness*. It's already happened. At the moment it is the migrant issue that is threatening to destroy the deliberate plan that was put in place after the two world wars. So, that is the issue we have to address directly. While Europe thought it could once occupy the world, today the world thinks it can occupy Europe. Is this the 'white man's burden' all over again? At least you must surely see that this is the same problem twice over, the same demand put on 'European civilisation', but this time the other way around. It is no longer a matter of working out how we can divide up the world, but how we can be capable of welcoming the world into our home. What remains is the link between the history of the world and the history of Europe. If the Old Continent is becoming historically relevant again, it is because other

¹ AOC, <https://aoc.media/a-propos-de-aoc/> Translated by Stephen Muecke.

peoples aspire to settle there. As far as I know, no one is risking their life to seek refuge in China or Russia. Be proud of the destiny that obliges you to wholeheartedly take on the key question of migration.

But it is precisely the fear of being invaded that is pulling apart the European project in all quarters, and it is used as an argument by all those demagogues who want to close themselves behind the gates of the former frontiers. Europe has nothing to say against them. To the so-called 'populist' wave, there is only the feeble call for a post-national project, betting on the ever-diminishing memory of wars and ruins. But if you speak to populists who are attached to their land, then for goodness sake, speak to them in the language of people and land, not in terms of Brussels and quotas!

For a people to take stock of who they are, they shouldn't just be offered a borrowed identity, they also have to be given a world to live in. Now, the land that the new 'populisms' think they are talking refuge in has no concrete existence, there are no durable attachments corresponding to it, and, what is worse, there are no real people that can live there. I don't mean legal attachments—the Brexit procrastinations prove how solid these links are—or even the economic links—can you imagine some Hungarian, Italian or Polish economy stopping at the border? I mean land in all its materiality, durability and sustainability. Yes, the land, worms and all, with its clods of clay, its insects, its germs, the living world. But also its towns, industries, architectures and ways of life; its air and water. I am just asking if populism has a solid enough version of the people and the land, something material enough to be more than illusion. If multinational Europe is, as they say, a disembodied dream, then the demagogues also need to acknowledge that their rehashed dreams of national identity are even more phantasmagorical, even less grounded.

At least the battle against the populists has the virtue of clarity. When speaking of people and land, you can actually compare dreamed-up identities with real attachments. You think such a battle can't be won? Wait, we haven't started yet! No-one is talking about a material and lived Europe, a 'motherland' Europe. Try carrying out an experiment. Ask any of those currently gagging on the idea of 'Brussels' to describe the concrete environment that allows them to live, the ins and outs of their sustenance and nourishment, and I bet you that you will be taken on a trip, not only across much of Europe, but also a large part of the world in which it is embedded (and that a large part of this EU you detest so much will be included in it, this time positively). Now is the moment to ask the question: what do you want to defend? If you answer, 'my interests come first', I will reply, 'fine, but you can no doubt see that these interests are in no way tied to the national identity in which you imagine you are enclosed.' If we are incapable of describing our world, how can we possibly defend our interests in it?