WHAT IS "CENTRAL" IN CENTRAL EUROPE?

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Abstract: This article seeks links between contemporary Europe and its historical state-nation experiences, above all when regarding "Reading the Other". Discussing – and challenging – the main three European dimensions – geographical, political and cultural, the article points out Europe's mission/task/meta-art - still to be fully fulfilled – to develop its remarkable "capacity to live, permanently and beneficially, with cultural difference: profitably to all sides not *despite* their differences, but *thanks* to them", as well as "to acquire and share the art of learning from each other". Tracing such abilities already in the Roman Empire the article focuses in particular on two Modern Central European states, based on multiculturalism and multinationalism: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both are discussed as experiments worthy of becoming essential examples for the today Europe.

Keywords: Europe; European Union; nation; state; cultural mixture; liquid modernity

Before we confront in earnest the question in the title, we need to answer another question: where to look and where to find *Europe*? Answering that other question is much less straightforward than it seems - but one can hardly attempt to competently answer the question in the title before we decide on what ground are we entitled to ascribe "centrality" to *Central* Europe - and so also to what kind of entity or entities have we the right to assign that name... It is identity of Europe that decides what is "central" – to its unique history, present predicament, and challenges that it is confronts at the entry into its future.

In contemporary usage, the term "Europe" stands for at least three different, and not at all overlapping phenomena. One is geographical; another political; and yet another cultural. Let me consider them in that order.

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"Whoever speaks of Europe is wrong: it is a geographical notion" – opined, dismissively, Otto von Bismarck. Bismarck was a politician through and through, and so no wonder he said what he said: what he referred to, was after all a "brute fact" of his time. At that time, Europe was everything but a political reality – the sole reality with which Bismarck was concerned.

Every notion derives its meaning from the opposition in which it stands to another notion: for Bismarck at the threshold of the twentieth century "being geographical" meant "*not* being *political*". "Politics" was then, as it is now, coterminous with a presidency or a throne, a Kanzlerei, Ministries, a Bundestag, and a dense network of governmental and quasi-governmental offices. Above all, even if Carl Schmitt went quite a bit too far in his pulling-no-punches vivisection of the original act and the defining feature of politics, when he reduced it to the appointment of "a common *enemy*", he was right when tracing the essence of politics in the naming, and dealing with, "the Other" of itself. Politics, we may say, is about creation and manipulation of *oppositions* and drawing *boundaries* between "inside" and "outside", and consequently differentiating the way in which each of the two members of the opposition, and so also each one of the two sides of border, are dealt with. Within its geographical borders as drawn by the cartographers, Europe (i.e., "geographical Europe") performed none of those functions: it had no institutions that would render performance of functions plausible, and indeed feasible. And so Bismarck was right when implying that Europe was not, in his time, a *political* reality. Though not necessarily was he right when denying to Europe any other reality except geographical. Well, I'd go a step further and suggest that Europe had in Bismarck's time some distinct and tangible geography-related realities which it has subsequently lost – particularly in the last half century or so, simultaneously with its concentration on the construction of its present-day political reality…

To start with: in the course of the last five centuries, the military and economic might of that north-western peninsula of the Asiatic continent which was called "Europe" tended to be topped with the unchallenged position of Europe as the reference point for the evaluation, praise or condemnation of all alternative, past and present, forms of human life; and as the supreme court where such assessment was authoritatively pronounced and made binding. It was enough just to be a European, says Ryszard Kapuściński, arguably the most acute and insightful reporter and recorder of the state of affairs in the late 20th century world, to feel everywhere in the world as a boss and a ruler. Even a mediocre person of humble standing and low opinion in his native (but European!) country rose to the highest social positions once landing in a Malaysia or a Zambia… This is no longer true, however.

Until quite recently (the older among us still remember those times…) Europe was that *centre* that made the rest of the planet a *periphery*. As Denis de Rougemont crisply put it,[i] Europe "discovered" one by one all the continents of Earth, but no continent ever discovered Europe; it dominated all continents in succession, but was never dominated

by any; and it invented a civilization which the rest of the world tried to imitate, but a reverse process has never (thus far, at any rate) happened. We may add: European wars, and only those wars, were *world* wars: inner-European dramas were staged in the world theatre. This is no longer true either.

Until quite recently, one could still define the "geographical" (in the absence of "political") Europe as de Rougemont suggested not that long ago: by its "globalizing function". Europe was for most of its last few centuries a uniquely adventurous geographical space, unlike any other. Having been the first part of the Earth to enter the mode of life that it subsequently dubbed "modern", Europe created locally problems no one on earth had heard of before and no one had the slightest inkling how to resolve. But Europe invented as well the way of their resolution - though in a form unfit to be universalized and deployed by lands to whom those problems, originally exclusively European, arrived later. The problems which Europe internally (and so locally) produced, Europe resolved by re-cycling other parts of the planet into sources of cheap energy, minerals, commodities, or inexpensive and docile labour; but above all into refuse-dumping tips for the by-products of modernization - the excessive and redundant products which it could not profitably use at home, and excessive and redundant people whom it could not at home employ.

To put it in a nutshell, Europe invented *global* solutions to *locally* produced problems – but having invented them and practised for a couple of centuries Europe forced in the end all other parts of humanity to seek, desperately yet to no avail, *local* solutions to the *globally* produced problems.

But this, again, is no longer true. As a matter of fact, one of the major considerations inspiring and stimulating the efforts to endow geographical Europe with a *political* reality was the realization that time had arrived for Europe, much like for the rest of the world, to seek or invent "*geographically* local" solutions to *globally* produced problems: solutions at least *locally* effective. Global solutions to the locally produced problems can be in principle available to a relatively few inhabitants of the planet only, and only for as long as those few enjoy superiority over all the rest, benefiting from a power differential large enough to remain unchallenged (at least not challenged effectively) and to be widely believed to be unchallengeable. But Europe no longer enjoys such privilege and cannot seriously hope to recover what it has lost. It was that circumstance which added a most powerful momentum to the construction of "political Europe" in the shape of the European Union - and which to a large extent influenced and continues to influence the stakes and objectives of European politics.

Much more than at the time of the original Schuman-Monnet-Spaak-Adenauer-de Gasperi initiatives, "political Europe" in its present shape needs to be understood as the by-product of an abrupt fall of European self-assurance. It has been that vanishing of the "we-can-do-it" self-confidence that triggered a sudden explosion of acute interest in a "new European identity", and in "re-defining the role" of Europe in order to match the current planetary game; a game in which the rules and the stakes have drastically changed and continue to change, albeit no longer on European initiative or under Europe's control, and with minimal, if any, European influence. Hence also a tide of neo-tribal sentiments swelling from Stockholm to Rome and from Paris to Budapest, magnified and beefed up by the deepening "enemy at the gate" and "fifth column" alerts and fears - and the resulting "besieged-fortress spirit", manifested in the fast rising popularity of securely locked borders and doors firmly shut.

On the other hand however the emergent (in fit and starts...) European Federation is facing the task of repeating, on a grander (and therefore potentially planetary) scale the feat accomplished by the emergent nation-states of early modernity: bringing back together power and politics, once closely interlinked but subsequently separated, and since their separation navigating (or drifting) in opposite directions. The road leading to the implementation of that task is as rocky now as it was then - at the start of the modern era and its nation-and-state-building stage. Now as much as then, the road is strewn with snares and spattered with incalculable risks. Worse of all, this road is unmapped, and each successive step feels like a leap into the unknown. And there are few signs of the political will to see the task through – as illustrated for instance by burying the Lisbon Treaty alive through electing to the posts of European President and the Head of Foreign Affairs persons remarkable mostly by their absence of remarkability, as well as by the remarkable, as never before unanimous equanimity, with which that appointment was received in the offices of Europe's 27 governments.

Many (most?) observers doubt the feasibility of begetting, cultivating, honing and entrenching a "European identity" - a political identity, not to mention a spiritual one - and score low the chances of that effort being seriously undertaken, let alone successfully completed. The sceptics don't believe in the viability of a "post-national" democracy, or any democratic political entity above the level of the nation – insisting that the allegiance to civic and political norms would not replace "ethno-cultural ties",[ii] and that citizenship is unworkable on purely "civilizational" (legal-political) basis without the assistance of "Eros" (the *emotional* dimension) - while assuming that ethno-cultural ties and Eros are uniquely and inextricably linked to each other as well as to the kind of "past-and-destiny sharing sentiment" that went down in history under

the name of "nationalism". They believe that communal-style solidarity can strike roots and thrive only inside this connection and cannot be rebuilt or established anew in any other way. That the nationalistic legitimation of state power was but a historically confined episode and but one of the many alternative fashions of a possible politics-power union, or that the modern blend of statehood and nationhood bore more symptoms of a marriage of convenience than of the verdict of providence or historical inevitability, or that the marriage itself was anything but a foregone conclusion and when arranged proved to be as stormy as most divorce procedures tend to be – all such possibilities are thereby dismissed by the simple expedient of begging the question.

Jürgen Habermas, arguably the most consistent and the most authoritative spokesman for the opposition to that kind of scepticism, points out however that

> a democratic order does not inherently need to be mentally rooted in "the nation" as a pre-political community of shared destiny. The strength of the democratic constitutional state lies precisely in its ability to close the holes of social integration through the political participation of its citizens.'[iii]

Already in this form the argument sounds quite convincing – and yet it may be pushed even further. The *nation*, as any promoter of a "national idea" would eagerly admit, is as vulnerable and frail without the protection of a sovereign state (assuring its *mêmeté*, *continuing* identity), as the *state* would be without a nation that legitimises its demands of obedience and discipline. Modern *nations* and modern *states* are twin products of *the same historical constellation*. One might "precede" the other only for a short time, while trying necessarily to make that short time as short as possible by filling it with the efforts to replace priority with simultaneity - through forcing the equation mark between the ostensibly autonomous partners. The French state was "preceded" by Provençals and Bretons, not Frenchmen; the German state by Bavarians, Saxons or Prussians, not Germans. Provençals and Bretons would have hardly turned into Frenchmen, and Bavarians and Prussians into Germans, let alone stayed Frenchmen or Germans for good, were not their reincarnation "power assisted" - by, respectively, the French and the German *states.*

For all practical intents and purposes, modern nations and modern states alike emerged in the course of two simultaneous, and closely intertwined processes of nation- and state-building; by anything but cloudless and friction-free processes, and anything but processes guaranteed *a priori* to succeed. To say that a political framework cannot be established without a viable ethno-cultural organism already in place, is neither more nor less convincing than to say that no ethno-cultural organism is likely to become and stay viable without a working and workable political framework. A chicken-and-egg dilemma, if there ever was one. And just as neither chickens nor eggs

in themselves are insured against extinction and guaranteed eternal existence, they can continue to exist only together - while both are doomed to extinction if but one of them dies without issue.

Due to the evaporation of much of its previously held power into the global space which Manuel Castells characterizes as the "space of flows", the inherited political framework of the nation-state has now however a growing difficulty in sustaining on its own the "ethno-cultural" organism that by common consent is in turn its indispensable companion. The symbiosis between the two threatens to fall apart, were it to stay, as before, to be confined to the nation-state level; most state units in Europe, just as on other continents, dispose currently of too little power to avoid the lot of the plankton - buffeted by tides it can neither control nor even effectively navigate. What clearly can't be achieved singly perhaps stands a better chance of success if undertaken jointly?

Let me here remind you of another of Otto von Bismarck's famous sayings: "I have always found the word 'Europe' in the mouth of those politicians who wanted from other powers something they did not dare to demand in their own name". I suppose that were he still alive, Bismarck would repeat that sentence with nothing but yet greater reassurance. And he would be right today as he was a hundred years ago. Only now, unlike at the time when that sentence was first pronounced, there are few state politicians who would dare make demands just in their states' name (unless they address their demands to Brussels...). And even those few, I suppose, have some doubts as to whether the chance of the demands made in that name to be met is equal to the chance of demands made in the name of Europe. We (Europeans) are all equal in our own, separate, *insufficiency* - and in our need to be protected/strengthened by a power greater than each of us may boast alone (even if it is true that some of us are more equal in this respect than some others)... Just as in the times of Bismarck's verdict, the word "Europe" can be heard nowadays more often in the mouths of some states' prime-ministers, than in the mouths of the prime-ministers of some other states. Whereas some of us, hearing the word "Europe", feel not unlike some Lombardians, when hearing the word "Italy": gnashing their teeth at the thought of sharing their hard-earned wealth with the slothful, improvident and happy-go-lucky Calabrians or Sicilians...

If they are to be lifted from the nation-state level and re-focused at a higher, European level, as I believe they need today to be, the essential features of human solidarity (like the sentiments of mutual belonging and of shared responsibility for the common future, or the willingness to care for each other's well-being and to find amicable and durable solutions of sporadically inflamed conflicts) need an *institutional* framework of

opinion-building and will-formation. The European Union aims (and moves – even if infuriatingly slowly, haltingly, sometimes in a one-step-forward-two-steps-back manner) towards a rudimentary or embryonic form of such an institutional framework - encountering in its way, as most obtrusive obstacles, the political establishments of existing nation-states and their reluctance to part with whatever is left of their once fully-fledged sovereignty. The current direction is difficult to plot unambiguously, and prognosticating its future fits-and-starts is even more difficult; in addition to being unwarranted, irresponsible and – let us say it - unwise.

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One thing seems to be relatively clear, however. Whether or not arising from ethnic roots, the stimulus to political integration and the factor indispensable for keeping it on course must be a shared sense/vision of a *collective mission*: a *unique* mission, which only within the projected political body can be undertaken and only with the help of that body is likely to be performed. Is there such a mission – a worthy mission – which Europe could perform, and by its history and its present qualities is predestined to perform?

Europe can't seriously contemplate matching American military might; neither can it hope to recover its past industrial domination, irretrievably lost in our increasingly polycentric world – the world now subjected to the processes of economic modernization *in its entirety*. It can however try, and should try, to make the planet hospitable to other values and other modes of existence than those represented and promoted by the American military superpower; to the values and modes which Europe is more than any other part of the world predisposed to offer the world which more than anything else needs to design, to enter and to follow the road leading to Kant's *allgemeine Vereinigung der Menschheit* and perpetual peace. Well, apart from being a geographical and (possibly) a political entity, Europe is also a *cultural* one.

George Steiner insists that Europe's assignment "is one of the spirit and the intellect".[iv] "The genius of Europe is what William Blake would have called 'the holiness of the minute particular'. It is that of linguistic, cultural, social diversity, of a prodigal mosaic which often makes a trivial distance, twenty kilometres apart, a division between worlds... Europe will indeed perish if it does not fight for its languages, local traditions and social autonomies: if it forgets that 'God lies in the detail'."

Similar thoughts can be found in the literary legacy of Hans-Georg Gadamer.[v] It is its variety, its richness boarding on profligacy, which Gadamer places at the top of the list of Europe's unique merits; he sees the profusion of differences as the foremost among

the treasures which Europe has preserved and can offer to the world. "To live with the Other, live as the Other's Other, is the fundamental human task – on the most lowly and the most elevated levels alike... Hence perhaps the particular advantage of Europe, which could and had to learn the art of living with others". In Europe like nowhere else, "the Other" has been and is always close, in sight and at hand's stretch; metaphorically or even literally, the Other is a next door neighbour – and Europeans can't but negotiate the terms of that neighbourliness despite the alterity and the differences that set them apart. The European setting marked by "the multilingualism, the close neighbourhood of the Other, and equal value accorded to the Other in a space tightly constrained" could be seen as a school from which the rest of the world may well carry out crucial knowledge and skills making the difference between survival and demise. To acquire and share the art of learning from each other is, in Gadamer's view, "the task of Europe". I would add: Europe's *mission*, or more precisely Europe's *fate* waiting to be recast into *destiny*.

The importance of this task, and the importance of Europe's determination to undertake it, is impossible to exaggerate, as "the decisive condition of solving vital problems of modern world", a truly *sine qua non* condition, are friendship and "buoyant solidarity" that alone can secure "an orderly structure" of human cohabitation. Confronting that task, we may and need to look for inspiration back to our shared European heritage: to the ancient Greeks - for whom, as Gadamer reminds us, the concept of "a friend" "articulated the totality of social life". "Friends" tend to be mutually tolerant and sympathetic. Friends are such people as are able to be friendly with each other however they differ, and to be helpful to each other despite or rather *because* of their differences - and to be friendly and helpful *without* renouncing their uniqueness, while never allowing that uniqueness to set them apart from and against each other.

More recently, Lionel Jospin invested his hopes for a new world importance of Europe in its "nuanced approach to current realities".[vi] Europe has learned, he said, the hard way and at an enormous price (paid in the currency of human suffering) "how to get past historical antagonisms and peacefully resolve conflicts", and how to bring together "a vast array of cultures" - and to live with a prospect of permanent cultural diversity no longer seen as only a temporary irritant. Let's note that these are precisely the sort of lessons which the rest of the world most badly needs.

When seen against the background of the conflict-ridden planet, Europe looks like a laboratory where the tools necessary for Kant's universal unification of humanity keep being designed, and as a workshop in which they keep being "tested in action", even if

for the time being in the performance of less ambitious, smaller scale jobs. The tools that are currently forged and put to the test inside Europe serve above all the delicate operation (for some less sanguine observers, *too* delicate for anything more than a sporting chance of success) of separating the bases of political legitimacy, of democratic procedure and willingness for a community-style sharing of assets, from the principle of national/territorial sovereignty with which they have been for most of modern history inextricably linked.

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This challenge, however, confronts a world very different from that in which our ancestors set about the construction of modern "bodies politic" - the nation states. Whatever else can be said about Europe facing that challenge, it is not that Europe is in undivided, fully sovereign control of the territory its institutions administer. European cities, and particularly mega-cities like London, are currently refuse bins, into which problems generated by globalization are dumped for recycling or incineration; though they are also laboratories in which the art of living with those problems is experimented with, put to the test, and (sometimes successfully, but always hopefully) developed. None of these two functions has been taken by such cities voluntarily, on their own initiative; neither are municipal councils capable of rejecting them and refusing to perform. One of hardest tasks "subsidiarized" to municipalities by globalization processes is tackling the heterogeneous, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and all together multi-cultural composition of living-and-working space: the result of massive migration triggered by the globalized spread of modernization notorious for its intense production of "redundant people", whom their native lands can't or wouldn't, for one reason or another, accommodate.

There have been three different phases in the history of modern-era migration.

The first wave of migration followed the logic of the tri-partite syndrome: territoriality of sovereignty, "rooted" identity, gardening posture (subsequently referred to, for the sake of brevity, as TRG). That was the emigration from the "modernized" centre (read: the site of order-building and economic-progress - the two main industries turning out, and off, the growing numbers of "wasted humans"), partly exportation and partly eviction of up to 60 million people, a huge amount by nineteenth century standards, to "empty lands" (read: lands whose native population could be struck off the calculations of the "modernizers"; be literally uncounted and unaccounted for, presumed either non-existent or irrelevant). Residual natives who survived the massive slaughters and

massive epidemics had been cast by the immigrants from "modernized" countries as objects of the "white man's civilizing mission".

The second wave of migration could be best conceptualized as an "Empire emigrates back" case. In the course of the retraction and dismantling of colonial empires, a number of indigenous people in various stages of "cultural evolution" followed their colonial superiors to the metropolis. Upon arrival, they were cast in the only worldview-strategic mould available: one constructed and practised earlier in the nation-building era to deal with the categories earmarked for "assimilation": a process aimed at the annihilation of cultural difference, placing "minorities" at the receiving end of cultural crusades, *Kulturkämpfe* and proselytizing missions (currently renamed, for the sake of "political correctness", as "citizenship education" aiming at "integration"). This story is not yet finished: time and again, its echoes reverberate in the declarations of intent of politicians, notorious for their inclination to follow the habits of Minerva's Owl, known to spread its wings by the end of the day. After the pattern of the first phase of migration, the drama of the "empire migrating back" is occasionally tried, though in vain, to be squeezed into the frame of the now outdated TRG (territory, roots, gardeners strategy) syndrome.

The third wave of modern migration, now in full force and still gathering momentum, leads however into the age of *diasporas*: a world-wide archipelago of ethnic/ religious/linguistic settlements - oblivious to the trails blazed and paved by the imperialist-colonial episode and following instead the globalization-induced logic of the planetary redistribution of life resources. Diasporas are scattered, diffused, extend over many nominally sovereign territories, ignore the hosts' claims to the supremacy of local demands and obligation, are locked in the double (or multiple) bind of "dual (or multiple) nationality" and dual (or multiple) loyalty. The present-day migration differs from the two previous phases by moving both ways (virtually all countries, including Britain, are nowadays simultaneously "immigrant" and "emigrant"), and privileging no routes (routes are no longer determined by the imperial/colonial links of the past). It differs also in exploding the old TRG syndrome and replacing it with a EAH one (extraterritoriality elbowing out territorial fixation of identities , "anchors" displacing the "roots" as primary tools of identification, the hunter's strategy replacing the gardener posture).

The new migration casts a question mark upon the bond between identity and citizenship, individual and place, neighbourhood and belonging. Jonathan Rutherford, acute and insightful observer of the fast changing frames of human togetherness, notes that the residents of the street in London on which he lives form

a neighbourhood of different communities, some with networks extending only to the next street, others which stretch across the world. It is a neighbourhood of porous boundaries in which it is difficult to identify who belongs and who is an outsider. What is it we belong to in this locality? What is it that each of us calls home and, when we think back and remember how we arrived here, what stories do we share? [vii]

Living like the rest of us (or most of that rest) in a diaspora (stretching how far, and in what direction(s)?) among diasporas (stretching how far, and in what direction(s)?) has for the first time forced onto the agenda the issue of the "art of living with *a* difference" – which may appear on the agenda only once the difference is no longer seen as a merely temporary irritant, and so unlike in the past urgently requiring the composition of new arts and skills, as well as arduous teaching and learning. The idea of "human rights", promoted in the EAH setting to replace or at least complement the TRG-era institutions of territorially determined citizenship, translates today as the "right to remain different". By fits and starts, that new rendition of the human-rights idea sediments, at best, *tolerance*; it has as yet to start in earnest to sediment *solidarity*. And it is a moot question whether it is fit to conceive group solidarity in any other form but that of loose, fickle and frayed, predominantly virtual "networks", galvanized and continually re-modelled by the interplay of individual connecting and disconnecting, making calls and declining to respond to them.

The new rendition of the human-rights idea disassembles hierarchies and tears apart the imagery of upward ("progressive") "cultural evolution". Forms of life float, meet, clash, crash, catch hold of each other, merge and hive off with (to paraphrase Georg Simmel) equal specific gravity. Steady and stolid hierarchies and evolutionary lines are replaced with interminable and endemically inconclusive battles of recognition; at the most, with eminently re-negotiable pecking orders. Imitating Archimedes, reputed to insist (probably with a kind of desperation which only an utter nebulousness of the project might cause) that he would turn the world upside down if only given a solid enough fulcrum, we may say that we would tell who is to assimilate to whom, whose dissimilarity/ idiosyncrasy is destined for the chop and whose is to emerge on top, if we only were given a hierarchy of cultures. Well, we are not given it, and unlikely to be given it soon.

We may say that culture is in its liquid-modern phase made to the measure of (willingly pursued, or endured as obligatory) *individual* freedom of choice. And that it is *meant* to service such freedom. And that responsibility, the inalienable companion of free choice, stays where the liquid-modern condition has forced it: on the shoulders of the *individual*, now appointed the sole manager of "life politics". And that it is meant to see

to it that the choice remains *unavoidable*: a life necessity, and a *duty*; but also that it becomes and remains a plausible, and feasible task – a task by which Europeans would be glad to measure their progress and a task within their reach.

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I suggest that the future of *political* Europe hangs on the fate of European *culture*. A few centuries ago, Europe harnessed "culture" to the service of the twin, closely intertwined nation-building and state-building endeavours; as first and foremost an agent of homogenization or indeed "Gleichschaltung" – aiming at political unity through levelling up the extant cultural diversity. With the policy of forceful assimilation no longer feasible, and a tendency to voluntary assimilation no longer plausible due to the flattening of the once power-assisted hierarchy of cultures and dissipation of power-assisted "cultural systems", the increasingly diasporic composition of the expanding geographical space of Europe augurs the shape of things to come – with all its challenges, chances and threats. Europe's currently composed heritage for the world's future is its (far from perfect, yet relentlessly growing) capacity to live, permanently and beneficially, with cultural difference: profitably for all sides not *despite* their differences, but *thanks* to them. Europe can offer to the globalized planet its know-how of reaching unity while leaving ossified antagonisms behind, its experience in devising and cultivating the sentiment of solidarity, the idea of shared interest and the image of a shared mission - not through the denigration of cultural variety and not with intention to smother it, but through its promotion to the rank of uncontested value and with the intention of protectinging and cultivating it. Europe has learned (and goes on learning) the art of transforming cultural differentiation from a handicap to cohabitation into its asset - an art which our planet needs more than any other art, a genuine *meta*-art, the art whose possession enables the development and acquisition of all the rest of the life-saving and life-sustaining arts...

This is not, to be sure, a situation totally unprecedented in the lands covered by the summary notion of "Europe". In fact, it was apparent and pronounced from the very beginning of Europe's history – and from the beginning ways of coping with that situation were diligently sought and successfully practiced (even if subsequently, time and again, those efforts and their merits came to be pushed aside and forgotten for centuries in a row). If we believe Titus Livius, the rise of Rome from humble beginnings to ecumenical stature and glory was due to the consistent practice of granting all conquered and annexed peoples full citizenship rights and unqualified access to the highest offices of the expanding country, while paying all due tribute to the gods whom the newcomers worshipped and endorsing the rites of worshipping them – and so

closing down the long record of internecine enmity and mutual mud-slinging needed in the past to justify the continuation of hostilities. For five centuries or so of Europe's early history, to many observers its most magnificent era, the growing segment of Europe lived inside the protective shield of the Pax Romana, where the equal, unqualified sum-total of citizenship rights was granted to the population of every newly conquered/admitted country, while the statues of its gods were added, no questions asked, to the Roman Pantheon, thereby assuring the continuous growth in the number and versatility of divinities guarding the integrity and so also the prosperity of Roman Empire. That Roman tradition of respect for the otherness of the other and of the state thriving-through-variety (that is, achieving citizens' solidarity thanks to, not despite their differences) has not been however, as already mentioned, continually observed throughout European history.

Whereas the emergent absolutist states in the West of geographical Europe were engaged in many decades of gory, devastating and seeds-of-hereditary-enmity-sowing religious wars, leading to the Westphalia settlement allocating to every ruler full right to coerce by hook and by crook his own religious (and so, by proxy, cultural) choices on the ruled, a large chunk of Europe east of Elbe managed however to escape the trend. That part of Europe stood up for its religious (and so, in substance, cultural *avant la léttre*) tolerance and communal autonomy. A star example of such an alternative was the Polish/Lithuanian "Res publica of Both Nations", generous in the rights of cultural self-governments and identity self-preservation lavished on its innumerable ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities – and escaping thereby the iniquities, bloodshed and other multiple horrors of religious wars that pulled the western part of Europe apart and covered it with spiritual wounds that took centuries to heal. This tradition, however, was to be brought abruptly to an end with the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian fortress of tolerance by its voracious neighbours - the dynastic empires of nation-state aspirations; in the aftermath of the partition, previously autonomous cultures, small and large alike, were subjected, respectively, to a forceful russification on its eastern side and a similarly ruthless germanization in the West, topped by the (on the whole unsuccessful, yet no less ardent for that reason) anti-catholic offensive by, respectively, the Christian Orthodox and Lutheran Churches.

Just how much the advancing modernity was sincere in its declared intention to promote the cause of freedom is a moot and to this day debatable issue, but beyond dispute is its proclivity to cultural intolerance – indeed the inseparable other face of the "nation-building" project. It was indeed the undetachable part and parcel of the twin, mutually supporting and reinforcing nation-and-state building projects that national

languages were to be formed through suppressing and delegitimizing communal "dialects", state churches put together through discrimination and extermination of "sects", or national memory composed through demoting and forgetting "local follies and/or superstitions".

One part of Europe – closest than any other to its "geographical centre" – resisted however also that massive assault on the idea of culture as a matter of individual self-assertive choice and the foundation of individual autonomy. This was Austro-Hungary, ruled from Vienna, not by chance a greenhouse of cultural creativity and incubator of by far the most exciting and seminal contributions to European philosophy, psychology, literature, music, and the visual and performing arts... It was also the area in which the practice of equality and self-government of cultures was raised, by most insightful minds of the time, to the rank of a model for the future of Europe; a model constructed with the intention, and hope, of cleansing the coexistence of European nations from the ghastly merger of cultural identity with territorial sovereignty.

The principle of national personal autonomy ("personal principle") was elaborated at length by Otto Bauer in his 1907 book *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie.* That principle was seen by him as a way to "organize nations not in territorial bodies but in simple association of persons", thus radically disjoining the nation from the territory and making of the nation a non-territorial association – this idea was offered for public discussion eight years earlier by another "Austro-Marxist", Karl Renner, in his 1899 essay *Staat und Nation,* and three years after that by a Jewish Bund leader Vladimir Medem in his 1904 essay *Social democracy and the national question* (written and published in Yiddish), a text bringing together and synthesizing the historic experiences of the Polish-Lithuanian Union and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy:

> Let us consider the case of a country composed of several national groups, e.g. Poles, Lithuanians and Jews. Each national group would create a separate movement. All citizens belonging to a given national group would join a special organisation that would hold cultural assemblies in each region and a general cultural assembly for the whole country. The assemblies would be given financial powers of their own: either each national group would be entitled to raise taxes on its members, or the state would allocate a proportion of its overall budget to each of them. Every citizen of the state would belong to one of the national groups, but the question of which national movement to join would be a matter of personal

choice and no authority would have any control over his decision. The national movements would be subject to the general legislation of the state, but in their own areas of responsibility they would be autonomous and none of them would have the right to interfere in the affairs of the others.[viii]

Such hopes were shattered and such blueprints drowned in blood spilt in the trenches of the Great War. Came the Versailles Peace Conference, and Woodrow Wilson's memorable verdict that the sovereignty of nations was the universal precept of humanity and needed to be accepted as the key to post-war reconstruction – a verdict that famously left Hannah Arendt bewildered and horrified, painfully aware and mindful as she was of the "belts of mixed population" being singularly unfit for the application of the criterion of "*ein Volk, ein Reich*".[ix] Even Wilson's ignorance (or was it disdain or arrogance?) was not enough however to prevent yet another (though half-hearted, to be sure) attempt at seeking and finding a mode of cohabitation better suited to the condition of overlapping and crisscrossing archipelagoes of diasporas, in the shape of the Yugoslav multi-ethnic state. A side remark casually dropped by Helmut Kohl in a moment of heedlessness (implying that Slovenia deserved independence because it was ethnically homogenous) was yet needed to open another Pandora's box of neighbourhood massacres and ethnic cleansings...

We, Europeans, are facing today, in the emergent era of diasporas, the prospect of Europe being transformed into a steadily widening and lengthening "belt of mixed population". Unlike the previous direction of the pendulum, this present process is not (state)power-assisted; quite on the contrary, state powers try as much as they can to slow down the process or grind it to a halt altogether – but the capacity at their disposal is ever more evidently far short of what stemming the tide of the fast and unstoppable globalization of inter-human dependence would require. The "pro-active" responses to the "diasporization" of social settings are slow, half-hearted, lacking in vision, and above all much too few and far between, if measured by their import and urgency: and yet this is precisely the context in which the prospects of Europe as a political and cultural entity, and the exact location of Europe's "centre", need to be deliberated and debated. It is in the part of Europe claiming the qualifier "Central" that the experience of communal identity separated from the issue of territorial administration is relatively fresh in the memory, and (perhaps) the habits acquired, practised and enjoyed in the era of cohabitation free from *Kulturkämpfe* and assimilatory pressures are recent enough to be recalled and re-embraced.

It is Central Europe's memory that shows Europe's future... Can you imagine a centrality more central than that?!

[i] See Denis de Rougemont, "L'aventure mondiale des Européens" (orig.1962), in *Écrits sur l'Europe,* Paris: Editions de la Difference, 1994.

[ii] See, for instance, Cris Shore, 'Whither European Citizenship?', in *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7.1, February 2004, pp.27-44.

[iii] Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays,* transl. by Max Pensky, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p.76.

[iv] See George Steiner, *The Idea of Europe,* Tilburg: Nexus Institute, 2004, pp.32-4.

[v] See in particular Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Das Erbe Europas*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 1989 – here quoted from Philippe Invernel's French translation, *L'heritage de l'Europe,* Paris: Rivages Poche, 2003, pp. 40 & 124.

[vi] See Lionel Jospin, "Solidarity or playing solitaire", *The Hedgehog Review*, 5.1, Spring 2003, pp.32-44.

[vii] Jonathan Rutherford, *After Identity,* London: Laurence & Wishart, 2007, pp. 59-60.

[viii] As recently quoted in Wikipedia from Yves Plassereaud, "Choose Your Own Nationality or The Forgotten History of Cultural Autonomy", in the English edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2000.

[ix] See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1986, p.270.

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