

**A Proustian Project for Europe:
Exploring a Possible Future, and a Critique of Binarism**

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Good afternoon,

Dear Friends, Distinguished Scholars,

First of all, thanks so much to the Institute of Advanced Study of Köszeg, and in particular to Professors Ferenc Mészáros and Anikó Magáshazi for your kind invitation.

I feel deeply honored by it, and happy to share with you a few tentative thoughts on Europe's prospects. And to participate in this conversation the way we might explore a forest: trying to help each other to find our path.

I think, I hope, we may be making Europe just by means of conversations not so dissimilar to this one.

I anticipate my points: (1) an open drama, (2) the broad goal of a European space for friendship, (3) a Proustian approach to mutual understanding, (4) a narrative of complex identities, and (5) questioning a binary framework.

1. A crisis, a drama, an undetermined outcome

Let's start with some of the *topoi* many Europeans share today. We find ourselves in dramatic circumstances: subject to a combination of pandemic cum economic crisis, political disarray, disquieting geopolitics (with the re-emergence of very powerful authoritarian states), a fairly fragmented society, and, say, deep cultural restlessness. All these are challenges to be met by the European Union and its national states – which, in turn, seem to have, both, a rather limited capacity to do it successfully.

Hence, we may infer, there is a middle-to-high risk for Europe to drift (possibly gradually) to increasing entropy, into chaos. Maybe in a mood of alarm. Maybe in the mood of a sort of *inertiae dulcedo*, going down *en douceur* (like the Roman Republic in Tacitus' view: Agricola, 3): allowing such descent to happen.

However, at the same time, we may argue, the next scenes of the drama are still to be written, the outcome of which is not pre-determined. And there is still room for us to make our leap of faith out of "the maelström" (Poe's image): room to make a bet, a Pascalian wager of some sort – and try to do better.

In other words, our critical situation may be seen as an opportunity to move forwards.

Provided... we understand it – understanding, learning by listening and being part of a conversation, all around.

The point is: the need to understand highlights the importance of learning by reasoning together: of a civic debate leading to the right decision and the right action at the right time.

A debate all around: (1) of course, with the main decision-makers, used to play in the center-stage of the public space, included. But also (and possibly mainly) (2) a debate for the common people. People who are used to apply their common-sense approach to the specifics of politics and policy, on a daily basis, in real life. And people without the support of which, no sustained policy is possible – and no polity may survive in the long run, either.

As well as (3) a debate for the kind of “benevolent enlightened people” Leibniz used to refer to about three centuries ago – just as a way to help Europe to get over a long, disastrous period of European un-civil (mainly political, partly cultural or religious) wars. A kind of people we may use as a role model for us, today’s academics and professionals and other variants of *spectateurs engagés*.

2. Europe as a space for conversation, for friendship

This very experience of conversing points the way to shape, to “re-make” (“re-create”?) Europe as a space of conversation... and lastly as a space for friendship. Providing Europe with crucial, both long-term and short-term benefits: reinforcing its identity and its strategic capacity, finding direction..., and also: learning how to proceed step by step – in fact, the very first step of a genuine conversation would already bear witness to our final destination.

Therefore, the key to proceed forwards lies, less in a combination of ingenious design and willpower, and more in sensible memories and empathy.

I mean: the way to achieve a space for conversation and friendship is not so much to define a project, and then, to outline an ingenious design, and then, make a strong show of willpower – and do it by means of a highly elaborated constitutional text, a number of political commissions, a major information and propaganda campaign, and the ensuing appeal to show up to vote or demonstrate in the streets.

Well on the contrary, making Europe requires neither a voluntaristic/decisionist project, under the banner of “more Europe!”; nor a nominalist, postmodern strategy: Europe being what we decide Europe to be. What is needed is, rather, for us to be “realistic enough”.

To begin with, by having a “common-sense sense of reality” (so to speak) – so as to reckon with, and learning to handle, Europe *as it is already*: as the (provisional, yet enduring) result of an ongoing experience of choices between different possibilities (by the way, mostly, the usual choices between a “second best” and a “lesser evil”...). Choices having been made, and choices to be made, and then, remembered and re-interpreted, again and again.

Thus, the way to achieve our goal concerning the future is to try our best at shaping the present while re-interpreting the past – in a way reminiscent of the way Otto Neurath suggested to articulate a theory: “like sailors who have to rebuild their ship in the open sea” (and “without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock and reconstruct it from the best components”).

Reinterpreting the past means dealing with a rather contested experience of centuries; and an experience with a considerable dose of ambiguity – as it is made out of contradictory elements: of both remembering and forgetting; of mutual care and self-centered egoism. Listening to each other the long, dramatic, contradictory account we give of a past made out of encounters and misunderstandings, of mutual help and continuous rivalry (often of a mimetic kind). And therefore, learning our (cognitive and moral and emotional) limits, and to live with such limits, while maybe trying to overcome them. So as to learn from our mistakes (or sins, or deeds that deserve repentance...) the best we can; while, on the other hand, taking heart in our achievements.

And, in the end... “growing”?

3. Building a moral character... with a Proustian touch

But we may understand “growing”, “growth”, in different ways.

For instance: not so much in terms of an accumulation of wealth and power and glory and technical knowledge; but rather in terms of “building a character” – which is, by the way, subject to a life cycle that may, or may not, nurture hopes for some sort of personal or collective permanence.

Finding some guidance to do so from, and choosing a way among, the many ways our educational ancestors have suggested. And then, taking a stand: for instance, a stand not to confuse magnanimity with a restless ambition to be top of the world no matter how – choosing the Pascalian wager, instead of a Faustian bargain? A Pascalian bet ... or maybe a Proustian one?

We may consider learning and understanding (“growing”) the Proustian way as we define Proust’s character by a continuous, endless rumination, and oscillation between past and present, that fosters intelligence as well as care for others, intense curiosity as well as empathy, lucidity, and a *rejection of the indifference as a summum of cruelty* towards others.

The world being perceived as composed of meaningful others: to start with, people closest to us... and reaching out to people of more remote places and times. And in the expectation that, maybe, (some? many?) people will listen with a significant dose of curiosity and empathy. Listening “in a spirit of charity” (Davidson): trying to understand what the others mean by what they say, instead of letting themselves go onto a war path, of endless either winning or losing.

The answer much depends on how we do define “the good things in life” (letting aside for a moment whether they are “limited goods” or not...).

As we all know, quite often, these “good things in life” refer to: power, wealth, glory and (say, pretenses of magical or technical...) omniscience – and, as such, taken for granted. On the other hand, it may happen these “good things” to be considered sort of “the usual suspects” of “the ways of the world” – which have been exposed, questioned in various moral languages, at least since axial times. This questioning being always somehow there.

Even so, here a caveat may be required – because, understanding life “as it is” (not “as it *merely* ought to be”) requires, also, “a sense of reality” that makes for expecting an important display of the passions of hubris and rapacity, of vanity and mania of indoctrination at any moment. Which have made, and make, for a sizable part of the human experience so far; and demonstrate that the “virtue” (or “moral goodness”) available to humans has its limits. This is a note of caution the European moralists of the 17th century knew all too well; and our experience of the last three centuries, after the Enlightenment, doesn’t alter the fundamentals of this conclusion so far.

4. A narrative of complex identities

My next point is to reckon with another “fact of reality” or “fact of life”: the pervasive experience of people living, dealing with their multiple identities. And to do so in such a manner that priority is given to one or another according to circumstances -- being subject to a near-continuous inner dialogue of people who feel to be members of several groups all at the same time. In fact, humankind has a very extended experience of dealing with multiple identities.

Returning to our topic, in the case of being Europeans and members of a nation-state, survey data

tell us, once and again, that about two thirds of Europeans (up to four fifths in several countries) feel being both members of a given nation and Europeans, and it's been this way for a long time.

The fact is that, as of today, they live their dual experience as being part of "a natural order of things"; nothing to feel strange, uneasy about. And this applies to all sorts of people having a feeling of being Europeans. It applies (1) to ordinary people, whose local experience far exceeds the one they may have with the rest of Europe; as well as (2) to elites of all sorts: to politicians, usually obsessed with the control of local politics; to businesspeople, eager to cultivate close links with local authorities and local markets; to publishers and writers and academics, most attentive to their cultural, linguistic communities, etcetera...

The very fact of being perceived as part of a "natural" order of things reflects a very long and complex historical experience, pre-modern and modern and contemporary. To put it in its most simple terms, that long, widespread experience includes (1) a long period of, say, sort of coexistence between empires and regional authorities, in the more distant past; and (2) the times of the quasi-modern or modern states, set on a game of countless conflicts and uneasy mutual accommodations.

And then, just in the last century it includes (3) a much too terrible set of experiences, when intense conflict evoked the possibility of utter mutual destruction, at least twice; followed by (4) seventy or more years of "peace and prosperity" in West-Europe, and about thirty years of something similar shared by the East.

This very contrast between war and peace has made for a prolonged *modus vivendi* and the apparent normalcy, and expectation, of an endless maintenance of the current *statu quo*. As a result of which most of us (today) are (have become) used to live with a sort of rather natural, harmonious dual identity; and engaged in a rather peaceful inner dialogue concerning both identities.

But, besides, we should remember that the current *modus vivendi* finds its roots in a legacy of a much more complex mix of symbolisms and experiences in the *longue durée* – as suggested, for instance, by the example of nations/cities "on the hill".

So that, the relatively recent experience of a peaceful, united or quasi-united Europe comes in the framework of a broader narrative, that displays the symbolisms of country, nation, *Heimat*, homeland, *patrie* in a way that reflects the view that the nation is unthinkable out of the context of Europe, not just here and now, but in the *longue durée*. Unthinkable as being not only part of Europe, but also as being a *special* part of it. Unthinkable, out of the whole system of European nations as loosely connected entities, confederations, empires, etcetera, being the European Union another avatar in a series of mutations of that system.

Wherein the nation transcends the rather narrow experience of just contemporary and modern times, which tend to overplay the differentiated character of each nation – while in fact, even the crucial moments of "putting the nation first" can try to obscure but cannot avoid pointing at the fundamental fact that being just the first of many others, makes us dependent on the others' recognition.

Let's take France, for instance, as a historical reality which embodies a very rich and very complex symbolism. That connects its current commitment to an open society, universalist values, to a very specific identity, and a sense of a national mission... rooted in a remote past linking the symbolisms of the Holy Land, and the France of Sainte Jeanne of Arc (Kantorowicz) – all through to the

Enlightenment and the French Revolution, not to mention the symbolisms of *le Roi Soleil* and Bonaparte, with their armies sustaining and embodying their desire for grandeur and for being the center of the world. Ready to take the lead of Europe any time, without ever neglecting their own protagonism.

And of course, France has not been, and is not, alone in this endeavor. Many European nations have seen themselves as bearers of extraordinary projects, as *providential* nations specially favored by some divinity. Hence, their national or patriotic stand usually having a deep religious, crypto-religious dimension – for reasons that seemed profound and sensible to many reasonable people at the time.

Spain, England, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Poland, Hungary..., and the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark... and Italy/Rome and Greece... All of them, at some point, expansionists by land and by sea and with the help of God; and defenders of their ancestors' legacy and of their true faith: a wall of containment against “godless invaders” challenging the very existence, and the essence, of ... the whole Europe.

5. Let's sum up: questioning the binary framework

A binary interpretative frame runs against the creation of the space of friendship and the complexity of feelings of belonging just referred to – as it poses Europeanists and nationalists against each other. It distorts the symbolisms and experiences by means of which most people all over Europe try to make sense of their dual identity, questioning both its European component and its national component, which is impossible to understand unconnected from Europe.

On top of this, such binarism reduces the strategic capacity of both Europe and its constituent nations to cut down the risk of drifting toward the sort of chaos I referred to at the beginning of this exposé – as it questions the culture of conversation and friendship which is needed and adds confusion to the European debate on the management of all sorts of issues.

By contrast, the development of a culture of conversation in all its dimensions, political as well as economic, social and cultural, checks the threat of a drift towards forms (1) of capitalism, or a market economy, functioning by remote control, unintelligible for most ordinary people, apparently leading to precariousness and inequality and dispossession of the many; (2) of democracy leaning towards partitocracy and oligarchy and populism, and a politics of division and exclusion; (3) of society becoming an aggregate of self-centered interest groups and identity groups; (4) and of a cultural milieu becoming a Babel Tower, with everyone trying to impose its own version of what may seem to him/her politically correct or morally correct.

In sum, Europe is, as has been so many times, once again, at a critical crossroads. Much depends on its capacity to remember, and to reckon with, not only its limits, but also its potential to listen and, thus, nurture a space of friendship, both inside Europe and towards the rest of the world.

Avoiding the worst of the current “binarism” of globalists versus localists, Europeanists versus nationalists. Learning from its past mistakes to handle its complex identities, contradictory narratives and changing socioeconomic arrangements. Making the best of our dramatic past.

Trying to be, not the center of the world; but just helping the world to stay alive – and being one of the many witnesses/shepherds to the world. Thinking and caring... as long as it takes.