

**EUROPE AS ICARUS OR
DAEDALUS, WITH WINGS OF WAX**

**BEYOND POLARIZATION:
A TIME FOR LEARNING**

Víctor Pérez-Díaz

ASP Research Paper 118(b)/2020

Research Papers



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This essay belongs in a project of Studies on Europe, sponsored by Funcas. A Spanish version was published as *Documento de trabajo*, 801 (Fundación de las Cajas de Ahorros).

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Depósito legal: M-6126-1994
ISSN: 1134 - 6116

1. Beyond polarisation: Europe and the limits to binary frameworks

Europe has both a narrative and a strategic deficit and, in short, a deficit of agency. It has still not taken its place in the world as a coordinated political agent with sufficient legitimacy of origin (which pre-supposes the decisive presence of a *demos*) and with substantive legitimacy (which involves the effective solution of major problems).¹ Today, burdened by this deficit, it faces the challenges of longstanding and ongoing turbulence. Overcoming the deficit of agency and improving the situation requires an understanding that the identity of Europe (what it is) and its politics (what it does) depends not so much on external factors as much as on the strategy and the imaginary of citizens and politicians in interaction with the whole of their institutional system, in other words, their market economy, liberal democracy and civil society, together with their cultural background.

In this short essay, I explore certain aspects of that imaginary. I concentrate on what I consider to be its weak point: a binary interpretive framework that, firstly, rigidly opposes the two poles of “globalism” *versus* “localism” and, in parallel, of “Europeanism” *versus* “nationalism” (or “populism”); and, secondly, presupposes that this opposition is tending to become increasingly intense, and that we are facing a process of growing polarisation.² Personally, I question the first premise, that is to say, the interpretive framework itself; and likewise the second, because I consider that we are not facing a situational or structural causality so powerful that it defines a trend, but rather that we are looking at an open drama.

This binary opposition is undoubtedly justifiable up to a point: for one thing, it expresses the conflicts of our time by identifying them as a very significant number of the adversaries do themselves. Nevertheless, it has another, unjustifiable side. In its usual simple and rigid form, such opposition fuels political struggles without promoting any understanding of them, and thereby hinders processes of debate and decision-making within the European political community. However, today more than ever before, these processes require us to pay close attention to the specificity, the complexity and the nuances of the circumstances; and even more so if we wish to encourage the participation of citizens in politics, and not their manipulation.³

I wish to explore another interpretive framework which, without disregarding the arguments and the tensions, centres around the possibility of creating a dynamic, well-reasoned balance between adversaries, and which encourages a conversation between them, including within it all of those who have not opted for either one side or the other.

So, let us imagine that we are watching a scene in a play in which Europe holds centre stage and can perform as one of two “personas” or two “masks” (“persona” originally deriving from the Latin term for a “theatrical mask”). It can play its role with a (pathetic) face split between opposing sides, leading to polarisations and confrontations and, in the extreme, perhaps bipolar or multiple personality disorder. Or it can play its role with another (let’s say, more serene) face which, if not showing

¹ I do not comment here on the ongoing debate on *demos* and *demoi* as it applies to Europe. See Scharpf (2015).

² Observers are divided between those who see a process of growing polarisation and those who question it. It is interesting in this regard to compare the reading of Hawkins, Yudkin, Juan-Torres and Dixon (2018) on the United States (who are convinced of the growing polarisation) with that of Krastev, Leonard and Dennison (2019) on Europe (who question that tendency). See a full account of this European debate, seen from Spain, in Pérez-Díaz (2019).

³ In other words, “I question” but I do not “completely deny” the possible relevance of that binary framework. It may be relevant for semiotic, conceptual and empirical purposes (Hiernaux, 2009), and be applied to ongoing processes, with careful attention paid to the complexity, the degree and the variations in those processes.

consensus, will at least reflect a kind of interior dialogue - of permanent conversation with itself - that will allow relatively more coherent behaviour. Thus we have the uncivil face of confrontation between enemies or the civil face of complex identities, civil conduct and tentative positions which lead to a path of learning and, frequently, to political compromises.

In effect, the face of civility combines identities, forms and compromises. Citizens' complex identities create identity politics congruent with everyone (or almost everyone) feeling themselves to be both European and national. Such feelings of belonging to a community (and/or a group of interconnected communities) are expressed by means of continuous exchanges and conversations, and they translate into a sensation of everyone taking part in the search for a common good. This, in turn, increases the probability of arriving at intermediate positions (alternations, compromises) in substantive policies such as socioeconomic ones, for example; highlighting the fact that a large majority of citizens are more "realistic and pragmatic" and "moderate and reformist" - in short, more similar to each other - than is generally recognised in public debate.

By applying this framework, we can better understand the course of past events in Europe, which includes the seven decades that have elapsed since the end of the Second World War. It is even probable that, if we were to take a very long-term view (and go back further than the modern age to more remote times), the framework would allow us to glimpse the traces of a sort of "cunning of reason in history", that would give rise to an account of the formation of Europe as a relatively reasonable process that is certainly dramatic but may at least be rational and, as such, transmitted to future generations.

Such an account would allow us to identify (and potentiate) Europe as a subject: not in the "Promethean" sense of raiding the heavens but with a (much) greater awareness of its limits. It is not an account of someone who "decides on their project" but of someone who "acknowledges their *telos* [purpose]". Neither is it one of a demiurge who creates their own reality, and what surrounds them, but of an agency which is joint protagonist of, and jointly responsible for, the historical process insofar as it is a "necessary co-operator", as the ancient Romans would say, in its development (Barrow, 1994: 10ff.).

However, a collective subject's sense of its limits ought to result from recognition of its own potential. The Europe in question, though limited, would be (at least and nothing less than) an agency, a political community. It would not be the juxtaposition of *several* communities in confrontation and (thereby) incapable of undertaking long-term public policies; whether they are about identity (who is the subject in question?), formal (how are they made?) or substantive (what is done?).

In sum, the protagonist of the European narrative would be a collective subject, with its inertias and its projects, big and small. And preferably, therefore, showing both a little dignity and a little humility.

We can illustrate my argument by referring to a story bequeathed to us from our Western mythopoetic tradition; from, in this case, the Graeco-Roman mythology that is associated specifically with the myth of Europa. Europa is carried away to Crete by Jupiter, and gives birth to Minos and other sons. This gives rise to other legends which include that of Daedalus and Icarus - and brings us back to our subject matter.

Recalling this legend, we could opt for our contemporary collective subject to behave in the same way as one or other of the two characters in the original mythical account: Daedalus or Icarus. And then, (I suggest) decide whether it is better for the subject to behave in the same way as a Daedalus, who is determined to fly but with caution, knowing that his wings are made of wax, or like a defiant Icarus who believes that he is master of his destiny (Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, book VIII, 183-235).

Daedalus wants to flee the labyrinth in which Minos has him imprisoned and, given that he is prevented from leaving by either land or sea, he tries to escape by air. He makes his wings from wax and feathers and gives a pair to his son as well, along with some good advice: not to fly too low and let the wings get damp but nor to fly too high and let them be melted by the heat of the sun. But Icarus is overcome by his desire to challenge the sun. He flies too high. His wings melt and he falls into the sea.

In this essay, I am inspired by Daedalus' advice. Namely, to avoid the extremes of the usual "agonising" binary framework (from the Greek *agon*: conflict, challenge, struggle) that encourages dreams of omnipotence, spurred on by the image of victory over a defeated enemy. Instead, I propose a reading of these turbulent times as times that are propitious: propitious for learning how to fly and learning how to land. I leave the application of the proposed framework to identity politics, the forms of politics, and some substantive public policies for another occasion.

2. Politics as a battleground: the image and its plausibility structure

The fact that a certain heuristic is being imposed on the public imaginary forms part of the great ceremony of confusion of the moment, and it is nothing less than a singular form of approximation to reality by simplifying its components (Kahneman, 2011). It consists of constructing a relatively simple and rigid scenario of contrasts between globalisms / Europeanisms and nationalisms / populisms. But how and why does this "agonising" binary interpretive framework prevail?

Some consider that the influence on our minds of this interpretive framework derives, partially, from its repetition *ad infinitum* in the media and political and academic discourse. It is as if repetition has a "magic touch" which the modern tendency to allow ourselves to be dazzled by appearances in relation to constant innovation tends to undervalue, but which political and commercial propaganda takes very much into account. Indeed, our daily (public and private) lives tell us that human beings repeat themselves - that we repeat ourselves - unremittingly. It is therefore hardly surprising that, starting with the more highbrow media, continuous repetition of that binary interpretive framework infects society; and that the probability of contagion is increased, perhaps, by a combination of people's spirit of submission and their instinct for survival, so that they adapt to the prevailing winds of word and image.

Nevertheless, it is useful to keep in mind that, ultimately, the plausibility structure of this framework stems less from the dominant or hegemonic imaginary (or "vision of the world") and more from the continuing realities and daily experiences of the people, both the elites and the masses. What is crucial is not the imaginary in itself but how it is expressed in actual behaviour; not the institutional framework itself but how it really functions. At this point, we find that the various components of the social system in Europe, perhaps of the Western world, today, could have led and do, in fact, lead in a direction that reflects and promotes this experience of duality and belligerence, to an extent that is still to be determined depending on the time and the place.

This is what happens when the market economy "drifts" into a form of capitalism in which the practice of competition leads to a perpetual "every man for himself" at whatever cost to everyone else and to the common good; when liberal democracy "drifts" into a system based on party politics and intense competition for power; when civil society (*qua* the associative fabric) "drifts" into a variant governed by the principle of asserting one's own identity and one's own will against those of everyone else; and, lastly, when a space for free and plural debate "drifts" into becoming a kind of Tower of Babel (referring back to the mythopoetic knowledge of our Judaeo-Christian tradition in *Genesis* 11).

The concurrence of all these various “drifts” would seem to indicate that the social system is functioning in such a way that any mutual recognition becomes little more than a “fight to the death for pure prestige” (in the reading of Hegel made by Kojève, 1969). This, far from announcing the triumph of reason in the history or formation of a civilised society, would constitute an (uncivil) “drift” of the model of civil or civilised society that, it is supposed, is the ideal model of the modern Western world (Pérez-Díaz, 2014). That “drift” is reflected in the image of politics as a battle - a continuous struggle, a *lotta continua*, as it was called by the impenitent revolutionaries of half a century ago - although, in reality, the battle metaphor has been employed from almost every political standpoint over the last two centuries. It is a war that stirs up feelings of love and hate, between the “good” and the “bad”, avoiding any effort at understanding the complexity of the relationships between adversaries, the propensity for ambivalence, and their episodes of mimetic rivalry.

An alternative option is to view the situation as an open-ended drama - which is more hopeful. This is because, in people’s actual experience and in the actual functioning of institutions, we can find a mixture of the two opposing imaginaries, both based on an image of politics as a battle, to be sure, but one of them based on an image of war leading to peace and the other, of perpetual war and perhaps of growing entropy.

Because, on the one hand, it is clear that, from the perspective of the globalist elites and the populist and nationalist counter-elites, the simple heuristic of polarisation has its advantages. It mobilises their supporters and sympathisers in a battle that echoes an eternal war of ideas and interests, and of fights for recognition or social superiority. This coincides with some part of the experience of the majority of people. However, on the other hand, there remains *another part* of their experience, which is no less important, whereby they tend also, and perhaps above all, to strive towards something so apparently simple as “living in peace”. This is reflected in the traditional idea/ideal of political society as a “community” working for a common good.

Drawing once again on the mythopoetic and religious tales of our traditional legacy, it is worth remembering that this is the mediaeval idea that, with solid classical roots, is evident in a significant part of our artistic treasures. It is the idea that is expressed, for example, in the frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the *Palazzo Pubblico* in Siena - discussed and analysed by Quentin Skinner (2002: 39ff.). His frescoes of *buon governo* [good government] depict a graceful dance against a background of agricultural work and urban prosperity - exactly the opposite of the battle scene in which warriors roam, confused in the darkness, in the verses of Matthew Arnold.⁴ This is a scene, and the idea, of peace interpreted, specifically, as a victory over discord - over *il cattivo governo* [bad government].

The kind of politics reflected in images of battle mobilises people to accept, and to participate in, a struggle that is made to seem inevitable. It leads to perpetual conflict that will intensify and abate over time, but which always marks the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. The latter then take comfort in the thought that the next victory will be theirs. Yet, for the majority of people, the perception of politics as a battleground, far from appearing obvious, can be disturbing and even shocking. There are still many people who, just as they aspire to “live in peace” (and/or feel nostalgia for it) are led by their common sense and their sense of the common good to an intermediate zone between the belligerent forces.

However, this is not always the case. Alternatively, people may succumb to the illusion of “voluntary servitude” (as La Boétie explains, 1993 [1578]) or to the need to find a scapegoat (Girard, 1982). In order to prevent this from happening (and, with it, preventing war, chaos and death), it is not enough

⁴ Famous verses from *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold (“and we are here as on a darkling plain (...) where ignorant armies clash by night”; 1995 [1867]) - an author who was firmly established within the classical tradition (Anderson, 1988).

to “have” common sense, one has to act on it. In order to do that, citizens have to mobilise their own resources of information and judgement, motivation and habit.⁵

3. Turbulent times and propitious times: propitious for learning and a safe landing

Current times are turbulent and Europe can sometimes feel like a kind of (Cretan?) labyrinth from which we need to escape. Subjected to an economic whirlwind, it has been unable to enjoy a sustained recovery from the crisis that began in the late 2000s; a crisis that has left us floundering in the wake of accelerated technological change, facing a panorama of precarious employment, risk to the welfare state, and a society more susceptible to the increase in inequality. At the same time, the political class has lost confidence in itself, and society is no longer willing to place much trust in it. In fact, the distance between societies and their political classes seems to have increased. This has led to gambling on new discourses and new parties and leaderships, and a clear increase in populisms. There is no area large enough within a troubled and confused public space to try out a long-term approach, based on trial and error, to find a reasonable compromise between conflicting views (and not an empty solution that leaves everything to inertia).

All the same, if chaos causes confusion, it can also create a positive, intelligent and active reaction and increase the level of awareness and participation of citizens in public affairs, almost as a question of survival. For this to happen, it is necessary for them to mobilise their socio-cultural resources, not so much by imagining (poetically) the future but rather (and especially) by acquiring a better understanding of what they already know. Because, in fact, they know a lot - more from what they have lived through and can remember than through what they might imagine when they try and peer into the future. And what they know can give them indications of the best path to follow as well as encouragement.

It is, therefore, a question of society undertaking an exercise in *anamnesis* and remembering and drawing on the well of experiences that it already possesses. An abundance of work well-done and of co-existence, of what we naively call habits of “sense and decency”, everyday virtues that we should emphasise in both a positive and a negative sense. In a positive sense because, without these basic socio-cultural resources, the advances (ancient and modern) in growth, food production, health, increased life expectancy and the strength of social and family ties at various levels would have been impossible; all of this has been extraordinary and yet, elemental and basic. In a negative sense, something no less elemental, basic and extraordinary should not be overlooked: that without these habits it would also have been impossible to have survived the two world wars (not forgetting some civil wars) and the two totalitarianisms which, over the last hundred years or so, have produced immense *democides*, probably in the region of two hundred million violent deaths (Rummel, 1994).

So, crossing once again (with a grain of salt) the porous borders between the social sciences and the mythopoetic and religious stories of our tradition, it is worth quoting here “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” from Ecclesiastes 3:1 (author’s translation from the Bible’s version by Cipriano de Valera, 1936 [1602]). According to this, the present time - our time - is not for flying but for landing safely: for everyone, political classes and citizens included, to remember and to learn.

In other words, turbulent times that are also propitious times and that are probably all the more propitious the more turbulent they are (if properly understood), just as they have been in the past

⁵ On the limits of citizens’ information, judgement and motivation in democracies today, see Achen and Bartels (2016).

and probably will be again (if better understood).⁶

Propitious times for politicians to acquire the art of restraint that makes it possible to go beyond the short-term manoeuvring and the battles. Propitious for the noise of the cultural wars to give way to a rational conversation between social imaginaries, which are often not as incompatible as might appear at first sight; for example, between that of those who emphasise individual freedom and property and that of those who give more weight to communities and traditions.⁷ Propitious for the voice of society to be heard, because it is filled with “sense and decency” or, in other words, common sense and a sense of the common good. And propitious for all of us, through trial and error, to achieve successes and rational compromises that allow us to better understand and manage the potential and the limits of our political experience.

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⁶ And, in this sense, and considering the recent present, it should be noted that the financial crisis of 2008 “opened our eyes” to the outstanding problems of the construction of “Europe”, as perhaps will happen yet again with the next crisis (Scharpf, 2015).

⁷ As can be seen (looking back) in European peasant traditions, initially from the late Middle Ages (and is shown, for example, in England, in Homans, 1968), and in the avatars of workers’ traditions of the last two centuries (see, for example, Thompson, 1963).

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