

THE CHALLENGE OF THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

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ASP Research Paper 4(b)/1994

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

1. Unity and fragmentation; European civil society.*

It appears that the construction of European (political) unity is a task that should be undertaken by today's Europeans to judge by the vehemence and reiteration with which it is proposed to us. Journalists, politicians, intellectuals, clerics or civil servants: the vast majority of them (of both the "right" and the "left") consider it their duty to remind us that this unity is desirable and even inevitable. But, for some reason, their exhortations seem to meet with only limited success. We listen to them, we acknowledge their sermons (with some reluctance) and we proceed to something more urgent or more interesting that rapidly becomes the focus of our attention or conversation.

The truth is that the subject of European unity is relatively absent from the everyday conversation of the majority of Europeans. This fact is of prime importance because it indicates how far we are from having laid the foundations of our edifice. We have a few important elements, some arches, part of the roof, some Roman tiles, a stork's nest, a baroque façade; and we have plastered up the advertisements, kitted out the tourist guides (with uniforms and regulations), built the roads and set up the coach services. We even have a motley crowd wandering around the site. But this crowd talks intermittently and out of turn; it needs to listen and converse. Without conversation, we shall never have the initial impetus for a united Europe and a European civil society.

For centuries, Europe has been accustomed to alternating between unity and fragmentation, continually reinventing her unity in plural forms. This internal plurality has been her sign of identity since the world of the Romans and the world of the Germanic tribes merged at the end of what we have since called the ancient world. The relative homogeneity of European cultural and socio-economic systems has always been under enormous pressure - and has never led to stable political unity. The tension between the Papacy and the Empire soon changed this unity into a longed-for but impossible aspiration; and its impossibility was

*Published under the title "Le défi de l'espace public européen", in *Transeuropéennes*, 3 (printemps), 1994.

accentuated by the emergence of powerful national states, against a backcloth of the broad dispersion of territorial powers and personal jurisdictions.

In the modern era, Europe has been the scenario of recurrent attempts at hegemony which, at their height, have not survived the passage of two, three or, at the very most, four generations. What, from the point of view of the protagonising nations were the hegemonies of "Pax Britannica", "*rayonnement*" or "*siglos de oro*" were transformed, in the eyes of their antagonists, into more transient and hazardous achievements, full of pretentiousness and fuelled by dreams of a somewhat illusory "greatness" which proved extremely dangerous for the freedom of all the others. As a result these hegemonic attempts have always provoked defensive alliances against them in the face of which they have usually succumbed. Each nation has had its "moment of glory" which has generally proved to be threatening to all the rest. Only in the course of time, once the danger has passed, has it been possible to soften the memory of these experiences. In this way, in the kaleidoscope of European memory, the terrible magnificence of the great, historic nations has become grist for the tourist mill; and the flower of their chivalry arrayed in knightly splendour has become cardboard cut-out horses decked out in tinsel on a merry-go-round, their only charms residing in the evocations of childhood.

The kind of political unity which Europe has embraced over and over again, throughout her history, has been the "soft" kind of relative equilibrium among the powers; this has created a moderately stable framework for the incessant struggle for cultural and economic domination among her many components, embarked upon a constant round of imitation and challenge among themselves. But although the experiment in the construction of European unity over the last forty years has gone a long way beyond this traditional balance of power it is, however, curious to observe that (in spite of the wishes expressed by so many of her political leaders) the creation of a European state does not seem to be the ultimate goal of this process of construction, and neither the institutions nor the sentiments of the majority of Europeans seem to respond to a project of "strong" political unity of this nature. In reality, this process seems better fitted to what would be the construction of a "European civil society" than a "European state".

In its widest sense, the expression "civil society" denotes an ideal type referring to a set of political and social institutions, characterized by limited, responsible government subject to the rule of law, free and open markets, a plurality of voluntary associations and a sphere of free public debate (Pérez-Díaz, 1993). The European situation only partly corresponds to the ideal type; but sufficiently so in order for its application to be of some value. European public authority is limited since, fundamentally, it is a directorate of (formally) sovereign public powers operating on the logical basis of an equilibrium of power, by which each one limits the others; to which some supra-national or trans-national organisms of unequal importance have been added. Markets make up a fundamental part of the European system and they are basically free and open (although the sectors in which European public authorities intervene are of considerable relevance, in particular the agricultural sector). The *dramatis personae* of the voluntary associations which operate at a supra-national or trans-national level are increasingly numerous, influential and diverse (in the form of businesses, academic networks, religious associations, policy networks and/or lobbies, etc.). As regards the public sphere, it is perhaps the least developed component of the four.

Nevertheless, the public sphere is decisive in the formation and development of a civil society because it is within this sphere that the problem arises (and is eventually solved) of deciding whether members of a society are simply free individuals who pursue their own private interests or whether they are, at the same time, "citizens" who engage actively in debate on public affairs and form opinions about them. It is the latter of these two alternatives which provides the basis for democracy because, among other reasons, it allows the development of feelings of collective identity and of belonging to a political community, both of which are conditions prior to democracy itself.

In fact, feelings of belonging to a civil society are encouraged by participation in the debate, as much within primary circles like the family, friends or the work group, as within the framework of wider social movements or organizations, and even in forums of generalized communication. Discussion centred around different arguments about the public good is the foundation of community; and even when this communication expresses diversity of opinion (which is normally the case), it tends to ratify everyone's interest in certain common themes

and reinforce feelings of belonging to the same entity, at least under certain conditions (provided the reasoning does not incline towards arguments for the exclusion from the community of those who hold a different position). Perhaps it is possible to build a political community in which the decisions of a charismatic or traditional leader are endorsed by popular acclaim with a minimum of articulated public discussion; but it is quite impossible to build a civil society without an abundance of it.

2. Some of the current difficulties in the development of the public sphere.

One of the difficulties of articulating either a civic conversation or a European public sphere at the present time arises from the fact that European unity does not seem to be a matter which excites much interest or attention among Europeans today. Their main interest is in matters which are orientated more towards their nations and nation states than towards Europe.

Let us take, for example, the question of the crisis of relations between political parties and public opinion, which many commentators believe it has been possible to observe in Europe for some time past. In some countries, this crisis has recently taken on a dramatic complexion. In Italy it has led to the substitution of the majority of the traditional political class (over the last fifty years) for another of a different order. For decades the Italians had lived with a party system whose corruption they were aware of but took philosophically: they knew about the irregular financing of their political parties but this did not prevent them voting for them with regularity. Perhaps they thought that it was a "lesser evil" because the party system was compatible with a high degree of prosperity and freedom (which a non-democratic, fascist or communist system would threaten); and that, to some extent, it was merely a logical extension of a somewhat lax lifestyle as regards abiding by the rules, whatever they were. Political and economic arrangements had always been made in this way to some extent, at least in large areas of the country. So that "corruption" had come to be looked on as a natural course of action; and it was felt to be something that northern Europeans, although they could not understand it very well, could, in practice, tolerate and learn to live with.

For some still mysterious motives it seems that this ambiguous selfcomplacency has abruptly disappeared. What began as a limited investigation into abuses in the north of Italy evolved, thanks to the Lombard League, into an explosion of indignation with spectacular electoral results, and thanks to the efforts of a network of magistrates, into an operation (*mani puliti*) exposing relations between the state, the parties and businessmen: in particular, the mechanisms for financing the political parties. The Italians have had to reinvent their state and their political regime, and in the process of doing so, they have had to create new parties and articulate a somewhat different political discourse with new ground rules.

The Spanish political crisis of the last year (which is still under way) bears a certain resemblance to the Italian one. Spain completed her transition to democracy within two to three years of Franco's death and consolidated it a few years later (when she could act without fear of a military coup, or a guerrilla or anti-establishment movement destroying it). But the "institutionalisation" of democracy, that is, the interiorisation of the ground rules as habitual behaviour on the part of its agents, has been much less easy to achieve. In Italy, it has not been fully achieved even after fifty years; and, in a manner of speaking, the Italians have had to re-constitute their republic anew. In Spain, almost twenty years after the transition, the climate of corruption has generated a political crisis of enormous gravity.

Whatever the outcome of this crisis, what I wish to underline is the cathartic function of a political crisis for the citizens of a country. They discover that they can no longer maintain their indifference or unconcern for public affairs. The question of political corruption follows them wherever they go, arising spontaneously in conversation. Politics, at its most basic, has become part of their lives and it arouses relatively intense and somewhat disagreeable feelings in them. They feel overcome by feelings of indignation or depression which they would probably prefer not to experience. In short, they have not been free to choose whether or not to take an interest in public affairs, they have simply found themselves unable to avoid them. It is almost as if they feel that they and their personal identity are implicated in these arguments: for this reason they react so emotionally.

Possibly they believe that they are affected by the question of corruption because it projects an image of a corrupt country of which they form a part, and that is humiliating. They have to admit that they already knew that it was corrupt, and that they have done little or nothing about it. They probably also know that, to a lesser degree, they and everyone else have conformed to the general standard and bent the rules too. Thus their anger towards those caught *in flagrante* is part of a phenomenon of ambivalence and the outward projection of the contempt which they may feel towards themselves (which makes these feelings rather more complicated than merely moral indignation or cynicism). In short, countries which are experiencing these spasms of doubt about their public institutions, expend a large part of their emotional energies on themselves; and the ordering of this institutional, cultural and interior disorder logically occupies a great deal of time.

If this were simply a localized phenomenon, we could dismiss it as an exception. But it is not. What has happened in Italy and Spain could probably happen in other countries which have recently embraced democracy, like Greece or the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which, in recent decades, have existed for most of the time under totalitarian regimes and, previous to that, under authoritarian and clientelistic ones. The transformation of these countries into "civil societies" with transparent, universal rules for political and economic life requires the setting-up of institutions (above all of a micro-social nature) which are difficult to design and attend to with sustained attention for a long enough period of time. If the problem of these nations could be defined simply as a problem of making the transition to and consolidating democracy, and introducing the fundamentals of a market economy (and a regime of private property) it would not be necessary to go into these "details". But civilisation rests on details. The first step may be to rewrite "the books" with the new ground rules (constitutions and laws), to make the necessary speeches and start the ball rolling. The next step is to attain a certain quality in the actual functioning of political, social and economic life, which can be a lot more arduous.

Is it possible to imagine a remotely similar situation occurring in the nucleus of the liberal democracies of Great Britain, the Europe of the Treaty of Rome or the Scandinavian countries? Not with the pathological features of the southern countries (although we should not overlook

the amnesty which the French political parties granted themselves on matters of corruption in 1989), but there does exist the same lack of confidence in relations between the political class and society, a problem of almost twenty years standing. The myth of the "good old times" of stable relations apparently brimming with confidence among the diverse social groups and political parties (presumably) refers to the fifties and (almost) the sixties. The following decades have seen a relatively volatile vote from many groups, the emergence of alternative social movements, feelings of malaise with the established parties, the redefinition of the messages of those parties, and the restlessness of public opinion. It has seemed obvious to many that, in such large and complex societies as our own, there is no room for direct democracy (not even at intervals, as occurs to some extent in Switzerland); nevertheless, it is no less obvious that the classic formula of representative democracy, in which a country delivers its political decision-making capacity into the hands of its representatives, who are usually incorporated into political parties, does not correspond to the sentiments prevalent among the European public at the present time.

To some extent this problem causes the introversion of public opinion, not its extroversion: attention centres on obliging politicians to put their house in order in each country. This preference on the part of the public is usually at variance with that of the political class in a number of European countries; this was made quite clear when the Treaty of Maastricht was ratified and one sector of public opinion condemned its politicians for their apparent neglect of domestic problems. Moreover, this disparity is comprehensible because today these problems are serious and urgent ones which concentrate the attention (and emotions) of the public on the performance of their national governments.

It is obvious that, in general, political discussions in almost all countries are centred on their own affairs; a glance through any European newspaper demonstrates this quite clearly, not only from the relative length of the articles but also from their rhetorical tone. What is central and what is peripheral is taken for granted: each country is the centre of "its" world. The language employed leaves no doubt about what inflames the passions of the readers and what merely attracts polite attention. Each country would appear to be deeply enamoured of itself (some of them indulging in an intense love/hate relationship) while it observes with

emotional distance the fortunes of all the rest, and in the meantime works out and weighs up its agreements and disagreements with them. It takes an interest in its neighbours, but keeps its heart to itself.

The critical problems of today do no more than confirm these priorities for the immense majority of the public in each country; above all if we take into account the definition of the situation which is proposed to them by the various political parties that need their electoral support. The economic crisis is still, and above all else, a matter to be dealt with by this or that domestic economic policy. It is said that soon the monetary policies of European countries will be a joint affair. Meanwhile, each country appears to be convinced that its government is responsible for the progress of its own economy; and the central bank, the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister are expected to produce an appropriate policy. The economy is the topic of debate between those in power and the opposition, the subject of incessant commentary, 'detached' or 'partisan', always humming away to make up half the editorials in all the newspapers, among other reasons because it is supposed that it is the hurdle at which elections are won or lost.

All this has a certain logic given that Europe has had about ten percent of its labour force unemployed for some years now (and in countries like Ireland and Spain the figure rises to about twenty percent). Every European country has its own problems, but almost all of them seem to be particularly preoccupied about the future of their industrial apparatus and about what has been called, in recent discussions, the capacity of European countries to face up to "the challenges of competitiveness and productivity". The most widespread opinion (which, for the purpose of this analysis, is sufficient, whether or not it is correct) assumes that this capacity is defective, especially in relation to that of others such as the United States, Japan and other countries with a booming economy. But the outcome of this is to worry about finding an adequate economic policy, country by country and government by government. Among other things because, if this were not so, no-one would quite know for certain what an elected government could be held responsible for, after such an abundance of enthusiasm and rhetoric every few years: or to whom businessmen should address their requests (and demands) with such tenacity and the unions with such vehemence.

The public life shared by all European countries revolves around the news broadcasts of their respective television channels, with their apparently detached explanations of the positions of political and social agents on these matters, and with their implicit invitation to spectators to adopt their own position. "Unemployment, crisis, unemployment, crisis" is the mantra ritually invoked to the nation's gods which changes viewers into fellow citizens. If this mantra (or an equivalent) were to be interrupted, the vacuum would be deafening in its silence. It would be like finding ourselves in the soulless cosmopolis of the Late Roman Empire: as if their gods had left the earth. (In such a way that perhaps now, anticipating this feeling, some of us are behaving "as if" we still believed that these economic policies are fundamental, although we suspect that they are not, for the simple reason that we want to retain the illusion of some public forums in which we can still recognize each other as fellow citizens of the same polity).

In any case, for the moment, the vast majority of opinion in each country continues (very reasonably) to insist on attributing responsibility to its own government for its economic and social policies. And here again we face a considerable problem. Because practically all European countries are trying to come to terms with the almost insoluble question of how to control and reorganize their heavily state-funded welfare systems which they have inherited from the past. This is a matter of enormous importance in the everyday life of the general public; and it is logical that it commands a large part of their attention.

In short, at this moment, the question of the construction of European unity can only take second place to domestic matters such as the redefinition of relations between European states and their societies, what is called "overcoming the economic crisis" (or simply, adjustment to the new conditions of the international markets) and a revision of the welfare system (and the welfare state). All these problems will be with us for a long time to come and it is to be expected that meanwhile public attention will, from preference, continue to focus on them and, by implication, on the policies of their respective countries.

3. Common themes: a performative contradiction.

Thus we have a curious divergence in the structure of the scale of preferences, the centres of interest, and the background assumptions of political discourse between one sector of the political classes and the most cosmopolitan economic, bureaucratic and academic circles on the one hand, and the greater part of the public on the other. The former devote a good deal of their energies to solving problems in a trans-European context, distinct to that of their respective countries, and in their eyes, this adds increasing plausibility to the hypothesis, or the suspicion, that national policies have a very limited effect on events. (Although it may also encourage them in the compensatory illusion that a supra-national European policy would have a decisive effect on them: an illusion which could prove equally mistaken, but that is another matter). The latter abide by their normally limited experience within a national frame of reference, and therefore they persist in making whichever government happens to be in power responsible to a large extent for what happens (to the desperation of those "cosmopolitan" members of their respective governments).

However, there are some matters common to both these élites and the public which have to be resolved in a European political context, but which, paradoxically, only tend to reaffirm the prevalence of the national interest outlook. When discussing these, I propose to show a new source of difficulties for the creation of a European public sphere: which is, that actual European policies (her public policies and politics) may contradict pro-European rhetoric.

At this point I wish to introduce the concept of "performative contradiction" which, taken in its widest sense, consists of contradicting words with deeds (or, strictly speaking, that certain behaviour implies an existential affirmation whose content contradicts the content of the verbal proposition: Habermas, 1991). Let us take European public policy *par excellence*, which is, of course, her agricultural policy. For a long time, taking care of this community public policy absorbed most of the energies of her civil servants and most of her economic resources: even now almost two thirds of the community budget is spent on subsidies to European farmers. But the fact is that European agricultural policy is, above all, a policy

designed to satisfy a few extremely important pressure groups on the domestic political front in the signatory countries of the Treaty of Rome, particularly France, Germany and the Benelux nations, which they then imposed on nations who were incorporated into the community at a later date; and above all, it is a policy orientated towards maintaining what is supposed to be a fundamental, symbolic ingredient of the territorial identity of each one of the nations in question. As a logical consequence of this, when the time comes to admit a new member, agriculture has usually been the main issue determining the ease or difficulty of the negotiations. Thus, for example, the Community waxed lyrical about the incorporation into Europe of the democratic Spain which rose from the ashes of her Francoist past. However, although Franco died in 1975, and Spain applied for entry into the community in 1977, she was only admitted in 1986; and not before our neighbours had made absolutely clear that the price Spain would have to pay for entry would be a substantial reduction in the competitive potential of her agriculture with respect to French agriculture. And in case the lesson should ever be forgotten, French farmers periodically take it upon themselves to express their popular fury against Spanish agricultural imports, in the best tradition of peasant revolts under the *ancien régime*; while French political parties of all shades look modestly away and calculate the foreseeable electoral results of their discretion.

All of this is naturally quite understandable. It is not a question of it being otherwise; it is merely designed to show, in the simplest way, the kind of feelings and interests associated with these practices which are no more than "the national interest *über alles*" or, in other words, the triumph of self-interested nationalisms. As a result, it comes as no surprise that the same logic (which it is difficult to describe as "pro-European") that considers Europe as an aggregate of self-interested nationalisms surfaces when the problem arises of what to do with the competitive potential of Central and Eastern European agriculture. It is obvious that the development of civil society, liberal democracy and a market economy in these countries requires economic growth and trade with Western Europe; and no less obvious that this implies opportunities for the exportation of their agricultural produce to Western Europe. However, with the logic inherent in her agricultural policy, Western Europe has refused to give these

countries such an opportunity, thus contradicting her rhetorical declarations of concern for their fate with her actual behaviour.

It is not difficult to see that a tendency exists for the logic inherent in the main public policy of the community to be extended to other areas. The distribution of the structural and cohesion funds has always given rise to extremely tough and rigorous bargaining in which different national interests confront one another. The very idea of structural and cohesion funds does not respond so much to a feeling of solidarity *per se* as to a compensatory mechanism (a side payment) in exchange for the overwhelming commercial penetration by the richer countries of northern Europe into those of the south, which have made it possible for the former to capture a large share of the markets and (capital and real estate) assets of the latter.

In short, the everyday reality of European politics differs from unitary rhetoric and consists of an amalgamation of national interests. It is true that with sufficient reiteration it is hoped that in the very long term the line between "what is yours, and what is mine" will become blurred, and a new community will emerge. I do not say that eventually this might not happen, but it is clear that, after fifty years, it is not sufficiently advanced to prevent the European political game still being seen principally, though not exclusively, as a series of games played by agents and networks of agents of the different member countries. Games which, in many cases, in the short term, are zero-sum games. This is how most, if not the majority, play games for the distribution of places on the commission, of headquarters, and of available funds; any attempts to project the long term perspective of a wider, unitary project onto these games have to take into account the immediate, basic reality of short termism.

On the other hand, such a wider, unitary project would seem to demand a stability of leadership that for some nations justifies their pretensions to be the leader or co-leader of all the rest. It is true that there have been recurrent episodes of joint initiatives, understanding and co-leadership by France and Germany. But, naturally, these two countries have tended to qualify their aim of collective leadership with that of satisfying their own particular interests. Perhaps due to this, the other countries have only accepted this co-leadership at intervals, conditionally and with reservations; for the better when it has been discreet (meaning less

leadership) and at worst with loud protests and clear ambivalence. This ambivalence has been demonstrated in the last two years, for example, when it became German policy to transfer the consequences of her own fiscal irresponsibility onto the shoulders of the other European nations (when she wanted to avoid financing aid and subsidies to East Germany by raising taxes in West Germany for electoral motives, which brought with it inflationary tensions which, in turn, forced the Bundesbank to raise interest rates).

Thus it is that at the very heart of community policy we frequently find the kind of behaviour, and the discourse implicitly or explicitly associated with it, which reinforces a sense of the differences of interest and identity between the European nations.

4. Problems of rhetoric, language and narrative.

So we have this wonderful dream of European unity and a substantially more prosaic everyday reality in which, however, the dream has to find fertile ground where it can grow and flourish. And there is no doubt that this is happening, in spite of everything. Because the growing frequency of contacts and their intensity in all spheres of life encourage stimulating exchanges, positive sum games, invitations for new meetings and opportunities for mutual understanding; and this is what some people hope will prevail at some indefinite point in the future. But high hopes need hard work on the ground and from this perspective it is of interest to weigh up the difficulties of development in another area of the European public sphere: in the rhetoric of persuasion.

The most obvious difficulty in this respect is that of language. In the United States, English functions as the medium of communication for all members of the community, on whom it imposes a "spirit of language" which is far more than just words or syntax in that it embodies a repertory of cultural forms, thought processes and emotional expression which allow peoples of the most diverse origins to share the most elemental and everyday experiences as experiences which define them as members of the same nation. In Europe, we neither have nor shall ever have a similar linguistic medium. Whoever wants to live a "European

experience" will be obliged to learn at least three or four languages, including English, probably German, perhaps French, as well as their own language or regional languages; most of which they will never learn in any depth. They will use them without ever becoming fluent.

The spread of languages throughout all our countries, given the stability of the majority of their populations, will probably take place along cosmopolitan routes where hybrid communities will settle. Languages will gradually extend in these communities as well as in the capital cities and the most dynamic cities. But it is unlikely that a plural society on the lines of the American model, where ethnic populations are scattered by geography, with no links to a particular territory with continuous borders in which they clearly predominate and venture to call "theirs", will be achieved in the foreseeable future.

This makes it far more complicated to find the narratives, and the myths implicit within them, on which to build shared memories. In the United States, Americans share the narrative of the foundation of the old colonies, the saga of the War of Independence and the Constitution, and two hundred years of (fundamentally) institutional continuity based on these origins. In Europe, nations tell stories which, familiar to one, are foreign to the next, stories that are like inverted mirror images. The glory of one led to the decline of another, the revolutionary expansion of one was the invasion of another, the divine Church of one was the scourge of heretics to another; the Enlightenment may be seen as imitation or banality; the dance of princes and territories, as a dance of death; the procession of heroes and victims to one is a line of scoundrels and sinners to another. Over time, the hostility and rancour have diminished somewhat; but it is doubtful whether they will ever disappear entirely because they are closely bound up with the founding or defining myths of identity of almost all the European nations. So we shall have to reconstruct our relationships with our respective histories in a metaphorical sense, by seeking the ("objective") truth of our origins in parallel with the ("subjective") truth of what our feelings are today towards those origins, the greater part of which the sensitivity of people today (apparently so reasonable) scarcely allows them to understand.

The part of our history which we understand best and which, to some extent, can unite us most easily, in spite of all its horrors, is that of this century. Even so, there are considerable divergences between some nations and others, especially between the greater part of Europe and the British Isles since only the United Kingdom appears to have had a relatively continuous historical sequence for the last three centuries, leading to a civil society which is both a liberal democracy and a market economy, whereas no continental European nation can claim a history of the same continuity. Only during this century can the majority of nations in Western Europe claim a similar continuity, having undergone the *via crucis* of a fascist or fascist-inclined totalitarian or authoritarian state and an appalling war before attaining (or reviving), by diverse means, some variant of the democratic and market ideal, having remained in this state of glory ever since. Therefore, it is this combination of passion, resurrection and glory, or ascension to heaven, if I may be permitted the religious metaphor, which has in some way unified a rather confusing and contradictory series of earlier historical trajectories in the case of Western Europe. As regards Central and Eastern Europe we should add the variant of a different totalitarianism prolonged over another forty years, with a happy ending.

The problem with recent history is that at its centre there is a disturbing narrative nucleus. Almost all these European nations underwent their totalitarian experiences as the result of processes which, to a great extent, were endogenous; so that without an external war or external military pressure, led (in one way or another) by the United States, it is not probable that they would have overcome them: Western Europe by means of the war and Central and Eastern Europe as a consequence of the strategy of containment. The most disturbing part of this narrative nucleus is that, at the heart of the glorious experience of a new united Europe resides a horror of itself: left to themselves, these countries fell into a frenzy (to an almost inconceivable degree in some cases) which they were unable to overcome by their own efforts. This consideration is inseparable from a certain feeling of humiliation or shame on the part of most of these nations (which is almost beyond confession, because to confess to it would go against the sense of due self-respect which it seems essential to maintain on the world stage). The compensatory narratives of resistance in France or Italy, or dissidence under Francoism and Salazarism in Spain and Portugal, of the subsequent good behaviour of Germany and

Austria, to give some examples, are not sufficient, in view of the profound wounds to the self-esteem of all these nations produced by years or decades of cooperation or collaboration with political regimes which, retrospectively, have come to be considered as contrary to the minimum standards of decency or civilization. (And to this we could add other complementary feelings relative to the colonial experience of these countries, at least in some circles.) An analogous argument could be applied to nations of Central and Eastern Europe.

The totalitarian experience was, without question, fratricidal; the institutionalization of a permanent state of "civil war" as opposed to the coexistence proper to a civil society. It was a civil war of nation against nation, class against class, at times race against race, which required the exaltation of violence and the regimentation of society under the orders of "men of steel" or "men of iron"; and which led to a world war which was lived in Europe, logically and almost literally, like a civil war (of which Spain and Greece had their own particular, local versions). The Europe which emerged from that world war was a Europe obsessed by the traumatic memory of that fratricidal experience (as was the Spain which emerged from Francoism). Perhaps, as a result, part of the impulse of the European nations to involve themselves emotionally in the process of European unity resides in an impulse of flight towards the future, towards a future which will make up for (and bury) a doubtful past; and on the other hand, part of the emotional reticence of the British to get involved in this process resides in the fact that they never underwent the experience. But let there be no mistake, this circumstance marks the impulse at the same time as it marks the limits of the impulse for unity. Because a process which partly responds to such an impulse is also a process which responds, to the same extent, to a sense of distrust and flight away from oneself.

5. Conclusions.

In this short paper I have endeavoured to set out some of the difficulties which we Europeans have in developing a public sphere which, if we aspire to the construction of a European civil society, would be desirable in order to stimulate the appearance of an active European citizenry involved in a discourse on our common problems. There are three main

reasons. Firstly, in difficult times such as the present, public interest and attention centre on internal matters, and the greater the difficulties the more attention they attract, particularly when it is expected that, by their nature, they should be solved by national governments. This is the case of the crises of credibility in the political parties (especially in some countries), the economic crises and the revisions to which the welfare state is subject. Secondly, European policy is hampered by what we might call a severe "performative contradiction" in which its behaviour contradicts its rhetoric, given that its everyday behaviour tends to follow the logic of self-interested nationalisms; as is demonstrated by what happens with regard to most of the public policies (starting with its agricultural policy) and the political games (or policy as politics) of the Community, and the distribution of power, money and influence within it. This continually reactivates the self-interested nationalism of member states. Thirdly, grave difficulties of a rhetorical nature exist in our persuading one another of our community of feelings. Language, remote historical narratives and, finally, the nucleus of our most recent historical narrative present us with serious problems to which there is not, nor will there ever be, an easy answer.

Perhaps this inventory of difficulties will cause the reader feel that its author is sending a subliminal message of the undesirability of a European public sphere, and by implication, of the whole construction. Nothing could be further from the truth. I do believe that the difficulties are enormous, but I do not believe that we should be discouraged by them. In any case, and if I may appeal to my own local tradition, I can only add that I would share with Cervantes a certain fascination for seeing things as they are, for seeing improbable and extraordinary undertakings with some sympathy, and even for feeling the inclination at best, to undertake them or, at worst, not to shrink away from them, whatever the result. An inclination, if truth be told, perhaps more appropriate of Don Quixote than of Cervantes, and possibly not that sensible.

In any case, we are faced by tasks which, though difficult, need not be impossible. Development of the public sphere is essential for the creation of European unity protagonized by an active citizenry; not by a trans-European political class or establishment which, by a process of manipulation, drags a heterogeneous series of national publics, alternating between

apathy and confusion, along with it. Firstly, this citizenry is capable of understanding for itself that a variety of internal policies for confronting certain crucial problems offers a learning opportunity by means of the comparison between numerous public policy experiments. Secondly, this citizenry could develop a certain critical awareness towards "performative contradictions" in European policies, between actual behaviour and appeals to principles, and it could deliberate on the extent to which it wishes to accept the implications of the self-interested nationalism which tends to dominate real policy-making (for example, in the form of protectionist trade policies). Thirdly, this citizenry could devote more attention to the problems of the construction of a community of feelings and to the problems of reconsidering our remote and recent historical narratives which this may involve.

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