

February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe

Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida

It is the wish of Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas to be co-signatories of what is both an analysis and an appeal. They regard it as necessary and urgent that French and German philosophers lift their voices together, whatever disagreements may have separated them in the past. The following text was composed by Jürgen Habermas, as will be readily apparent. Though he would have liked to very much, due to personal circumstances Jacques Derrida was unable to compose his own text. Nevertheless, he suggested to Jürgen Habermas that he be the co-signatory of this appeal, and shares its definitive premises and perspectives: the determination of new European political responsibilities beyond any Eurocentrism; the call for a renewed confirmation and effective transformation of international law and its institutions, in particular the UN; a new conception and a new praxis for the distribution of state authority, etc., according to the spirit, if not the precise sense, that refers back to the Kantian tradition.

We should not forget two dates: not the day the newspapers reported to their astonished readers the Spanish prime minister's invitation to the other European nations willing to support the Iraq war to swear an oath of loyalty to George W. Bush, an invitation issued behind the back of the other countries of the European Union. But we should also remember February 15, 2003, as mass demonstrations in London and Rome, Madrid and Barcelona, Berlin and Paris reacted to this sneak attack. The simultaneity of these overwhelming demonstrations – the largest since the end of the Second World War – may well, in hindsight, go down in history as a sign of the birth of a European public sphere.

During the leaden months prior to the outbreak of the war in Iraq, a morally obscene division of labor provoked strong emotions. The large-scale logistical operation of ceaseless military preparation and the frenetic activity of humanitarian aid organizations meshed together as precisely as the teeth of a gear. Moreover, the spectacle took place undisturbed before the eyes of the very population which – robbed of their own initiative – was to be its victim. The precautionary mustering of relief workers, relief services, and relief goods dressed itself in the rash rhetoric of alleviation of suffering yet to be inflicted; the planned reconstruction of cities and administrations yet to be ruined. Like searchlights, they picked out the civilized barbarism of coolly planned death (of how many victims?), of torments long

since totted up (of how many injured and mutilated, how many thirsty and hungry?), of the long-planned destruction (of how many residential districts and hospitals, how many houses, museums, and markets?). As the war finally began, the Ernst Jünger aesthetic of the skyline of the nighttime Baghdad, illuminated by countless explosions, seemed almost harmless.

A Common European Foreign Policy: Who First?

There is no doubt that the power of emotions has brought European citizens jointly to their feet. Yet at the same time, the war made Europeans conscious of the failure of their common foreign policy, a failure that has been a long time in the making. As in the rest of the world, the impetuous break with international law has ignited a debate over the future of the international order in Europe as well. But here, the divisive arguments have cut deeper, and have caused familiar faultlines to emerge even more sharply. Controversies over the role of the American superpower, over a future world order, over the relevance of international law and the United Nations – all have caused latent contradictions to break into the open. The gap between continental and Anglo-American countries on the one side, and “the old Europe” and the Central and East European candidates for entry into the European Union on the other side, has grown deeper.

In Great Britain, while the special relationship with the United States is by no means uncontested, the priorities of Downing Street are still quite clear. And the central and eastern European countries, while certainly working hard for their admission into the EU, are nevertheless not yet ready to place limits on the sovereignty that they have so recently regained. The Iraq crisis was only a catalyst. In the Brussels constitutional convention, there is now a visible contrast between the nations that really want a stronger EU, and those with an *understandable* interest in freezing, or at best cosmetically changing, the existing mode of intergovernmental governance. This contradiction can no longer be finessed. The future constitution will grant us a European foreign minister. But what good is a new political office if governments don't unify in a common policy? A Fischer with a changed job description would remain as powerless as Solana.

For the moment, only the core European nations are ready to endow the EU with certain qualities of a state. But what happens if these countries can only find agreement on the definition of “self-interest”? If Europe is not to fall apart, these countries will have to make use of the mechanisms for “strengthened cooperation” created in Nice as a way of taking a first step toward a common foreign policy, a common security policy, and a common defense policy. Only such a step will succeed in generating the momentum that other member states – initially in the Euro zone – will not be able to resist in the long run. In the framework of the future European constitution, there can and must be no separatism. Taking a leading role does not mean excluding. The avant-gardist core of Europe must not wall itself off into a new Small Europe. It must – as it has so often – be the locomotive.

It is from their own self-interest, to be sure, that the more closely-cooperating member states of the EU will hold the door open. And the probability that the invited states will pass through that door will increase the more capable the core of Europe becomes of effective action externally, and the sooner it can prove that in a complex global society, it is not just divisions that count, but also the soft power of negotiating agendas, relations, and economic advantages.

In this world, the reduction of politics to the stupid and costly alternative of war or peace simply doesn't pay. At the international level and in the framework of the UN, Europe has to throw its weight on the scale to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States. At global economic summits and in the institutions of the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF, it should exert its influence in shaping the design for a coming global domestic policy.

Political projects that aim at the further development of the EU are now colliding with the limits of the medium of administrative steering. Until now, the functional imperatives for the construction of a common market and the Euro-zone have driven reforms. These driving forces are now exhausted. A *transformative* politics, which would demand that member states not just overcome obstacles for competitiveness but form a common will, must take recourse to the motives and the attitudes of *the citizens themselves*. Majority decisions on highly consequential foreign policies can only expect acceptance assuming the solidarity of outnumbered minorities. But this presupposes a feeling of common political belonging on both sides. The population must so to speak "build up" their national identities, and add to them a European dimension. What is already a fairly abstract form of civic solidarity, still largely confined to members of nation-states, must be extended to include the European citizens of other nations as well.

This raises the question of "European identity." Only the consciousness of a shared political fate, and the prospect of a common future, can halt outvoted minorities from the obstruction of a majority will. The citizens of one nation must regard the citizens of another nation as fundamentally "one of us." This desideratum leads to the question that so many skeptics have called attention to: are there historical experiences, traditions, and achievements offering European citizens the consciousness of a political fate that has been shared together, and *that can be shaped together*? An attractive, indeed an infectious "vision" for a future Europe will not emerge from thin air. At present it can arise only from the disquieting perception of perplexity. But it well can emerge from the difficulties of a situation into which we Europeans have been cast. And it must articulate itself from out of the wild cacophony of a multi-vocal public sphere. If this theme has so far not even gotten on to the agenda, it is we intellectuals who have failed.

The Treacheries of a European Identity

It is easy to find unity without commitment. The image of a peaceful, cooperative Europe, open toward other cultures and capable of dialogue, floats like a mirage

before us all. We welcome the Europe that found exemplary solutions for two problems during the second half of the twentieth century. The EU already offers itself as a form of “governance beyond the nation-state,” which could set a precedent in the postnational constellation. And for decades, European social welfare systems served as a model. Certainly, they have now been thrown on the defensive at the level of the national state. Yet future political efforts at the domestication of global capitalism must not fall below the standards of social justice that they established. If Europe has solved two problems of this magnitude, why shouldn’t it issue a further challenge: to defend and promote a cosmopolitan order on the basis of international law against competing visions?

Such a Europe-wide discourse, of course, would have to match up with existing dispositions, which are waiting, so to speak, for the stimulation of a process of self-understanding. Two facts would seem to contradict this bold assumption. Haven’t the most significant historical achievements of Europe forfeited their identity-forming power precisely through the fact of their worldwide success? And what could hold together a region characterized more than any other by the ongoing rivalries between self-conscious nations?

Insofar as Christianity and capitalism, natural science and technology, Roman law and the Code Napoleon, the bourgeois-urban form of life, democracy and human rights, the secularization of state and society have spread across other continents, these legacies no longer constitute a *proprium*. The Western form of spirit, rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, certainly has its characteristic features. But the nations of Europe also share this mental habitus, characterized by individualism, rationalism, and activism, with the United States, Canada, and Australia. The “West” encompasses more than just Europe. Moreover, Europe is composed of nation-states that delimit one another polemically. National consciousness, formed by national languages, national literatures, and national histories, has long operated as an explosive force.

However, in response to the destructive power of this nationalism, values and habits have also developed which have given contemporary Europe, in its incomparably rich cultural diversity, its own face. This is how Europe at large presents itself to of non-Europeans. A culture which for centuries has been beset more than any other by conflicts between town and country, sacred and secular authorities, by the competition between faith and knowledge, the struggle between states and antagonistic classes, has had to painfully learn how differences can be communicated, contradictions institutionalized, and tensions stabilized. The acknowledgement of differences – the reciprocal acknowledgement of the Other in his otherness – can also become a feature of a common identity.

The pacification of class conflicts within the welfare state, and the self-limitation of state sovereignty within the framework of the EU, are only the most recent examples of this. In the third quarter of the twentieth century, Europe on this side of the Iron Curtain experienced its “golden age,” as Eric Hobsbawm has called it. Since then, features of a common political mentality have taken shape, so that

others often recognize us as Europeans rather than as Germans or French – and that happens not just in Hong Kong, but even in Tel Aviv. And isn't it true? In European societies, secularization is relatively far advanced. Citizens here regard transgressions of the border between politics and religion with suspicion. Europeans have a relatively large amount of trust in the organizational and steering capacities of the state, while remaining skeptical toward the achievements of markets. They possess a keen sense of the “dialectic of enlightenment”; they have no naïvely optimistic expectations about technological progress. They maintain a preference for the welfare state's guarantees of social security and for regulations on the basis of solidarity. The threshold of tolerance for the use of force against persons lies relatively low. The desire for a multilateral and legally regulated international order is connected with the hope for an effective global domestic policy, within the framework of a reformed United Nations.

The fortunate historical constellation in which West Europeans developed this kind of mentality in the shadow of the Cold War has changed since 1989–90. But February 15 shows that the mentality has survived the context from which it sprang. This also explains why “old Europe” sees itself challenged by the blunt hegemonic politics of its ally. And why so many in Europe who welcome the fall of Saddam as an act of liberation also reject the illegality of the unilateral, pre-emptive, and deceptively justified invasion. But how stable is this mentality? Does it have roots in deeper historical experiences and traditions?

Today we know that many political traditions that command their authority through the illusion of “naturalness” have in fact been “invented.” By contrast, a European identity born in the daylight of the public sphere would have something constructed about it from the very beginning. But only what is constructed through an arbitrary choice carries the stigma of randomness. The political-ethical will that drives the hermeneutics of processes of self-understanding is not arbitrary. Distinguishing between the legacy we appropriate and the one we want to refuse demands just as much circumspection as the decision over the interpretation through which we appropriate it for ourselves. Historical experiences are only *candidates* for self-conscious appropriation; without such a self-conscious act they cannot attain the power to shape our identity. To conclude, a few notes on such “candidates,” in light of which the European postwar consciousness can win a sharper profile.

Historical Roots of a Political Profile

In modern Europe, the relation between church and state developed differently on either side of the Pyrennees, differently north and south of the Alps, west and east of the Rhine. In different European countries, the idea of the state's neutrality in relation to different worldviews has assumed different legal forms. And yet within civil society, religion overall assumes a comparably unpolitical position. We may have cause to regret this social *privatization of faith* in other respects, but

it has desirable consequences for our political culture. For us, a president who opens his daily business with open prayer, and associates his significant political decisions with a divine mission, is hard to imagine.

Civil society's emancipation from the protection of an absolutist regime was not connected with the democratic appropriation and transformation of the modern administrative state everywhere in Europe. But the spread of the ideals of the French Revolution throughout Europe explains, among other things, why politics in both of its forms – as the organization of power and as a medium for the institutionalization of political liberty – has been welcomed in Europe. By contrast, the triumph of capitalism was bound up with sharp class conflicts, and this fact has prevented an equally unprejudiced appraisal of the market. That different evaluation of *politics and market* may back Europeans' trust in the civilizing power of the state, and their expectations for its capacity to correct "market failures."

The party system that emerged from the French Revolution has often been copied. But only in Europe does this system also serve an ideological competition that subjects the socio-pathological results of capitalist modernization to an ongoing political evaluation. This fosters the *sensitivity of citizens to the paradoxes of progress*. The contest between conservative, liberal, and socialist agendas comes down to the weighing of two aspects: Do the benefits of a chimerical progress outweigh the losses that come with the disintegration of protective, traditional forms of life? Or do the benefits that today's processes of "creative destruction" promise for tomorrow outweigh the pain of modernization losers?

In Europe, those who have been affected by class distinctions and their enduring consequences understood these burdens as a fate that could be averted only through collective action. In the context of workers' movements and the Christian socialist traditions, an ethics of solidarity, *the struggle for "more social justice,"* with the goal of equal provision for all, asserted itself against the individualistic ethos of market justice that accepts glaring social inequalities as part of the bargain.

Contemporary Europe has been shaped by the experience of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and through the Holocaust – the persecution and the annihilation of European Jews in which the National Socialist regime made the societies of the conquered countries complicit as well. Self-critical controversies about this past remind us of the moral basis of politics. A heightened *sensitivity to injuries to personal and bodily integrity* is reflected, among other ways, in the fact that both Europarat and EU made the ban on capital punishment a condition for entrance.

A bellicose past once entangled all European nations in bloody conflicts. They drew a conclusion from that military and spiritual mobilization against one another: the imperative of developing new, supranational forms of cooperation after the Second World War. The successful history of the European Union may have confirmed Europeans in their belief that the *domestication of state power* demands a *mutual* limitation of sovereignty, on the global as well as the national-state level.

Each of the great European nations has experienced the bloom of its imperial power. And, what in our context is more important still, each has had to work through the experience of the loss of its empire. In many cases this experience of decline was associated with the loss of colonial territories. With the growing distance of imperial domination and the history of colonialism, the European powers also got the chance to *assume a reflexive distance from themselves*. They could learn from the perspective of the defeated to perceive themselves in the dubious role of victors who are called to account for the violence of a forcible and uprooting process of modernization. This could support the rejection of Eurocentrism, and inspire the Kantian hope for a global domestic policy.

(Translated by Max Pensky)

NOTE

This article originally appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 31 May 2003.

Let's begin by dispelling a few misconceptions about Derrida's work. Derrida is not and never was a postmodernist. He is not a private ironist, nor is he some sort of mystical or anarchic neo-Heideggerian. His work does not exacerbate nihilism, nor does it refuse or attempt to overcome the Enlightenment, the Subject, or whatever else. Deconstruction, in Derrida's hands, does not level the genre distinction between philosophy and literature (in fact, the opposite might be closer to the truth), nor does Derrida denigrate politics, society, and history to the status of the ontic. February 15, or what binds Europeans together: a plea for a common foreign policy, beginning in the core of Europe. *Constellations*, 10(3): 291-297. Katzenstein, P. J., & Checkel, J. T. (2009), "Conclusion" *European identity in context*, European Identity (Cambridge UP). Crisis and European Integration (31Mar) Do crises promote or reverse European integration? Read: *Tsoukalis 2011 and 2013; Hodson and Puetter 2013. Garton Ash, T. (2012), "The crisis of Europe", *Foreign Affairs*, 91(5): 2-15. *Hodson, Dermot and Puetter, Uwe (2013), "The European Union and the Economic Crisis", in M. Cini and Nieves Borragna (eds), *European Union Politics* 4ed. 2003. February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe. *Constellations*, 10:3, pp. 291-297. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. CEC (Commission of the European Communities). Cite this chapter as: Sassatelli M. (2015) Narratives of European Identity. In: Bondebjerg I., Redvall E.N., Higson A. (eds) *European Cinema and Television*. Palgrave European Film and Media Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137356888_2.