



New  
Direction  
— REVIEW —

Issue #1 | December 2025

# GUIDING CONSERVATISM

NEW LEADERSHIP  
FOR A NEW ERA

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# New Direction

the Foundation for European Conservatism



New Direction – Foundation for European Conservatism, was founded in 2009 as the official foundation of the European Conservatives and Reformists. Since then it has grown to become a leading voice for the European conservative movement – providing a platform for national foundations and civil society groups to be heard at the heart of European politics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Until a few years ago, conservatism was considered a residual intellectual and political movement. The acceleration of progress made progressive ideology seem almost inevitable and made anyone who dared to question it seem out of touch with the world, outdated. How could anyone think of asking for the preservation of something that the evolution of history was already making disappear, through science, technology and neo-Enlightenment philosophies? These arguments were put forward by progressives, and have dominated in the mind of the public. This so-called progress was not only social, or economic, but also political: at the same time, we experienced the overcoming of the classic right-left divide, despite the fact that the aforementioned progress would sweep away the old political points of reference.

And yet all these claims of the demise of the old order have proven wrong, because they did not take into account one essential element: the natural order of things. What progressives tried to ignore, was the reaction of society as a whole to the attempt to pursue progress for the sake of progress. The advent, or rather the return, of conservatism to the West is happening because it is being called for by people who want a return to wisdom and common sense, to



**Nicola Procaccini MEP**  
President of New Direction,  
Co-Chair of the ECR Group

ensure that every step towards the future is taken without forgetting the lessons of the past. Not as a leap into the unknown, but a confident stride forwards. It is therefore not a surprise that conservatism is on the rise, from America to Argentina, Italy to Sweden,

### How could anyone think of asking for the preservation of something that the evolution of history was already making disappear, through science, technology and neo-Enlightenment philosophies?

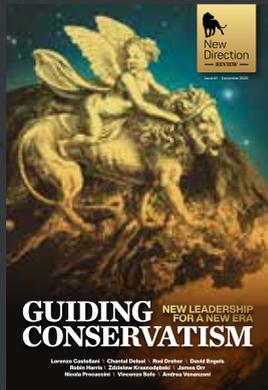
Japan to New Zealand – conservative parties are on the ascendency. And now it is finding its home in Europe, in the changing dynamics within the halls of power in the European Union.

New Direction stands, as it always has, as the intellectual bastion for the family of European

conservative parties. It has been working to provide the intellectual backing to the conservative movement in Europe by underlying the political choices made within the institutions. It has worked as a platform to export the ideas, values and motivations behind the actions and decisions of these political forces, in order to explain to others what conservatism is and what it stands for. Those who aspire to lead have a duty to engage with the wider world and even with their opponents: to convince others, but also to test the soundness of their own ideas and, where possible, to find common ground.

The revival of this magazine works to this end: to be a vehicle for the elaboration and dissemination of our thinking. A printed agora that gives voice to and compares all the reflections of the diverse conservative tradition and also compares them with those of people who are not part of this world view or are even distant from it, to remind everyone that we are first and foremost, and

regardless of everything else, part of the same polis, Europe and the West, and that – as our tradition from Socrates onwards teaches us – debate remains the best method for arriving at the truth. If not the absolute truth, then at least the truth that concerns choices for the good of the public. ▀



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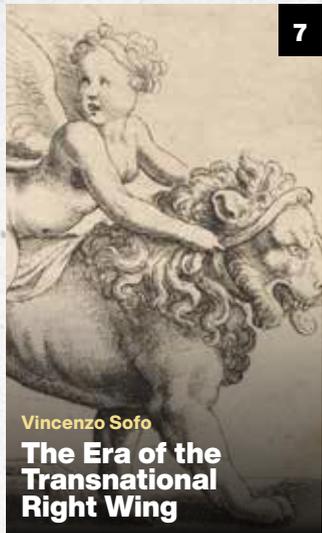
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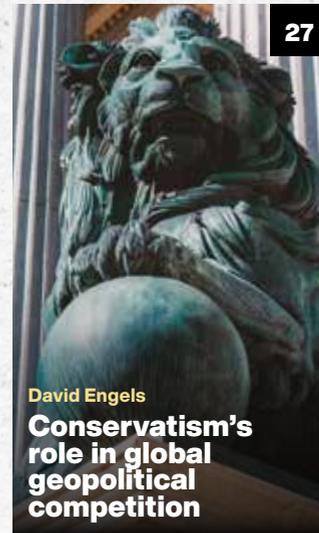
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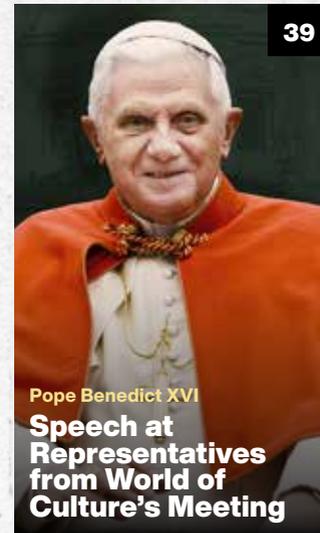
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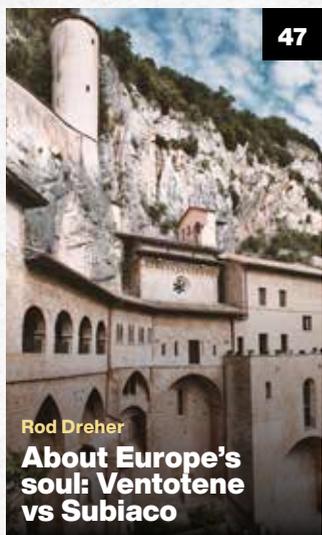
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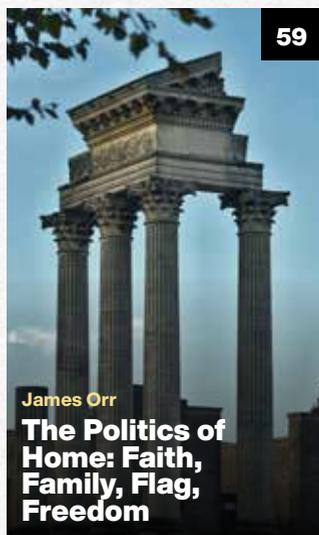
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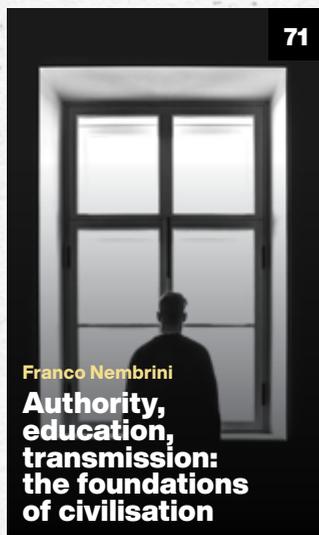
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Cupid riding a lion, walking in profile to right, holding a band wound around its neck and forehead. From a series of six plates, etched by Hollar after drawings by Giulio Romano from the collection of Nicolas Lanier, designs for stucco medallions at the Palazzo Te in Mantua.



EDITORIAL

# The Era of the TRANSNATIONAL RIGHT WING

Vincenzo Sofò

10 September 2025 is one of those dates when, as a television viewer, you find yourself watching an important, extremely important news story, much talked about by everyone, but without realising that what you are witnessing may one day, in the future, be considered a historical event, one that future generations will read about in their school textbooks. None of us had any doubts on the morning of 11 September 2001 when the attack on the Twin Towers marked the official beginning of the era of conflict between Islam and the West. In reality, it was a conflict that, although more subtle and less talked about in public opinion, had already been going on for some years, but on that day in New York, Osama Bin Laden decided to certify it and reveal it to the world.

The day we saw the images of Charlie Kirk breathing his last breaths after being shot in the neck by a political opponent was a shock to everyone. We all immediately rushed to the media, both traditional and social, to comment on it. Looking at the reactions that all of us – politicians, journalists, opinion makers, citizens – in Europe had and the debate that arose around this crime on our continent, one observation

stands out: the tone and violence of the confrontation between the European right and left was more or less equivalent to that seen in the United States. In fact, in the hours following the assassination, one only had to scroll through the homepage of the most political of social networks, X, where the algorithm favours the mixing of posts by American and European users, to realise how similar and overlapping they were.

But how is it possible that an event, albeit a brutal and shocking one, that takes place in the United States can have such a direct, violent and lasting impact in Europe? Because, and this is the subtlety I am trying to get across, Charlie Kirk's

**One might say that European society has always been much closer to American society than to Chinese society, which is obvious, and the reason is called the West.**

murder was perceived by all of us Europeans as a domestic news story, not a foreign one. This is despite the fact that the scene was thousands of kilometres away from Europe's western border, roughly the same distance that separates our eastern border from China. Yet, as we all know, the murder of a Chinese Charlie Kirk would have provoked much less of a reaction, even today when the shadow of Beijing covers our skies and its presence is becoming increasingly visible and tangible.

Of course, one might say that European society has always been much closer to American society than to Chinese society, which is obvious, and the reason is called the West. But with the Kirk episode, there has been a qualitative leap in this relationship: there is proof that the political life of the two sides of the Atlantic is moving towards a gradual merger. But just as 11 September was not the beginning but the culmination of the clash between Western and Islamic civilisation, 10 September is not the beginning but the culmination of this process. The internationalisation of politics, at least within the Western world, is not in fact a new phenomenon but one that has been going on for some time.

As we know, the first attempts at transnational action were made in the 19th century by workers' movements, which later developed into the Marxist-inspired idea of proletarian internationalism.

The idea developed by Marx and Engels is an intelligent one: labour is a driving force for political struggle capable of crossing national borders, and therefore perfect for promoting the establishment of an International, which is indeed what happened. For the two German

philosophers, this was a natural and obvious reaction to capitalism's destruction of national borders, since *'the need for ever-expanding markets drives the bourgeoisie to invade the entire globe. It must establish itself everywhere, settle everywhere, create relations everywhere'*. However, they did not hesitate to point to national borders as tools used by the bourgeoisie to hinder the class struggle, preventing workers from uniting as a single phalanx. This is why the socialist revolution had to be international.

After the end of the Second World War, however, the beginning of the Cold War created a schism between the left, divided between those loyal to the Western bloc and those loyal to the Soviet bloc, and the new socialist international limited itself to incorporating the former while excluding the latter: the ideological/geopolitical border prevailed over the global nature of the struggle they were supposed to be waging, but the desire to break down national barriers remained constant. We thus witnessed the birth of the social democratic international, the starting point for today's global left. Meanwhile, the end of the First World War had sown the political seeds of political globalisation, the first fruit of which was the birth of the League of Nations as an attempt to provide global governance for the world, and the second was the establishment of the UN. A different concept of 'internationalisation' began to take shape, one that focused more on overcoming national borders through new supranational institutions than on global class struggle, a terrain where socialism and capitalism intersect, with the latter gradually managing to penetrate and mould the former, causing it to change and evolve into a more digestible form of progressivism.

The acceleration came with the fall of the Berlin Wall and, therefore, the end of the Cold War: with the border of borders shattered, economic globalisation began to proceed at a brisk pace, raising one international support

organisation after another (IMF, WTO, World Bank, etc.). The model that this phenomenon brings with it, the liberal and free-market model, is ultimately appealing to the left, and so – silently – the traditional class struggle with the proletarian worker as its protagonist disappears from the agenda. What remains is the war on national borders, but there is a big problem: finding a way not to deny one's socialist nature. And two variations: not being able to define oneself as either liberal or free-market and having to find a way to continue, or pretend to do so, to stand up as champions of class struggle. Thus arose the liberal left\*, with ad hoc censorship of the final part of the word so as not to tell the whole truth. And so many small class struggles arise, some exploited, others invented from scratch: those in favour of the global south, those in favour of migrants, those in favour of the climate, those in favour of the LGBTQ world. From the socialist international to progressive anti-globalisation.

If there is one thing that must be acknowledged about the left, it is that they have been able to ride the global wave, tailoring their methodology of action to suit. Campaigns such as those on climate catastrophe or minority rights have allowed them to exploit the process of globalisation to spread and impose their new ideology across the globe, or at least in the Western world. Throughout this time, however, if there is one thing that must be blamed on the right, it is that it has failed to develop a counter-action at the same time. In their defence, it must be said that the very fact of being engaged in the defence of national entities (and the borders that these entail) constituted an understandable conceptual obstacle to the organisation of transnational political action, which at that stage might have seemed a contradiction in terms. To find a principle of transnational organisation of the struggle on the right, we must therefore wait for the new millennium and the growth of the influence of European institutions on the political, economic and social dynamics of its Member States and, with it, the increase in the importance of Community political forums. But also the acceleration of the political agenda set up by US progressives and handed over to their overseas allies.

It is in fact thanks to Brussels, the cold meeting place for delegations from all the continent's parties, which has evolved to embody the role of common enemy, that the right wings of the various European countries are beginning to talk and reason with each other. But it is thanks to Washington, or rather thanks to the radicalisation of the confrontation sought and provoked by American progressives and then imported by their European counterparts, that the two right-wing factions separated by the Atlantic are beginning to come together. This has caused an earthquake: the birth of conservative anti-globalism. Conservatism is

the glue, the only possible glue, generated in the US but restoring traditional European values.

The assassination of Charlie Kirk is not the beginning but the culmination of this rapprochement. And it is probably the point of no return in the process of internationalising the political battle within the West, made of-

ficial by progressives raising George Floyd as their transnational banner, thinking they had a contemporary martyr who would give them undisputed moral superiority, not imagining that in doing so they would themselves provoke the birth of a true martyr in the opposing camp. The conservative tsunami caused by the earthquake described above will most likely be the protagonist of European and Western dynamics in the coming years. It is the geopolitical scenario itself that favours it, or rather demands it. What we will do in this issue is provide you with the elements to analyse the nature, features, usefulness and concrete applicability of a phenomenon that is probably inevitable. Regardless of the fears of the left or the exaltations of the right, it is a lion that must be understood how to ride. ▀



**Vincenzo Sofo**  
Editor-in-chief of New Direction Review

**“Regardless of the fears of the left or the exaltations of the right, it is a lion that must be understood how to ride.”**





# J.D. VANCE

## Speech at Munich Security Conference

Munich, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

One of the things I wanted to talk about today is, of course, our shared values. And, you know, it's great to be back in Germany. As you heard earlier, I was here last year as a US Senator. I saw Foreign Secretary David Lammy and joked that we both had different jobs last year than we do now. But now is the time for all of our countries, for all of us who have been fortunate enough to be given political power by our respective peoples, to use it wisely to improve our lives. And I want to say that I have been fortunate in my time here to spend some time outside the walls of this conference over the last 24 hours, and I have been so impressed by the hospitality of the people, even, of course, as they are recovering from yesterday's horrific attack. And the first time I was in Munich was with

my wife, actually, who is here with me today, on a personal trip. And I've always loved the city of Munich, and I've always loved its people. I just want to say that we are very moved, and our thoughts and prayers are with Munich and all those who have been affected by the

**The good news is that I believe your democracies are far less fragile than many seem to fear. And I truly believe that allowing our citizens to have their say will make them even stronger.**

evil inflicted on this wonderful community. We are thinking of you, we are praying for you, and we will certainly be cheering you on in the days and weeks ahead.

We are gathered at this conference, of course, to discuss security. And we usually mean threats to our external security.

I see many, many great military leaders gathered here today. But while the Trump administration is very concerned about European security and believes that we can reach a reasonable agreement between Russia and Ukraine, and we also believe that it is important in the coming years for Europe to take a big step forward in providing for its own defence, the threat that concerns me most with regard to Europe is not Russia, it is not China, it is no other external actor. What concerns me is the threat from within. Europe's retreat from some of its most

fundamental values: values shared with the United States of America. I was struck by the fact that a former European Commissioner recently appeared on television and seemed happy that the Romanian government had just cancelled an entire election. He warned that if things do not go as planned,

the same thing could happen in Germany.

Now, these dismissive statements are shocking to American ears. For years, we have been told that everything we fund and support is in the name of our shared democratic values. Everything from our policy on Ukraine to digital censorship is touted as a defence of democracy. But when we see European courts annul elections and senior officials threaten to annul others, we should ask ourselves whether we are holding ourselves to a sufficiently high standard. And I say ourselves, because I fundamentally believe we are on the same team.

We must do more than talk about democratic values. We must live them. Now, in the living memory of many of you in this room, the Cold War pitted the defenders of democracy against far more tyrannical forces on this continent. And consider the side in that struggle that censored dissent, that closed churches, that cancelled elections. Were they the good guys? Certainly not. And thank God they lost the Cold War. They lost because they neither cherished nor respected all the extraordinary blessings of freedom — the freedom to surprise, to fail, to invent, to build. Apparently, you cannot impose innovation or creativity, just as you cannot force people to think, feel or believe. And we believe that these things are certainly connected. And unfortunately, when I look at Europe today, it is sometimes not so clear what has happened to some of the winners of the Cold War. I look at Brussels, where European Commission commissioners have warned citizens that they intend to shut down social media in times of civil

unrest: the moment they identify what they deem to be ‘hate speech’, or at this very country where the police have carried out raids against citizens suspected of posting anti-feminist comments online as part of the ‘fight against misogyny’ on the Internet. I look to Sweden, where two weeks ago the government convicted a Christian activist for participating in Koran burnings that led to the murder of his friend. And as the judge in his case chillingly observed, Swedish laws that supposedly protect freedom of expression do not, in fact, guarantee — and I quote — a “free

**“We must do more than talk about democratic values. We must live them.”**

pass” to do or say anything without risking offence to the group that holds that belief.

And perhaps most worryingly, I look to our dear friends in the UK, where the retreat from conscience rights has particularly targeted the fundamental freedoms of religious Britons. Just over two years ago, the British government charged Adam Smith Conner, a 51-year-old physiotherapist and army veteran, with the heinous crime of stopping 50 metres from an abortion clinic and praying silently for three minutes, without obstructing anyone, without interacting with anyone, just praying silently on his own. After British law enforcement

officers spotted him and asked what he was praying for, Adam simply replied that it was for his unborn child. He and his ex-girlfriend had had an abortion years earlier. Now the officers did not budge. Adam was found guilty of violating the government’s new buffer zone law, which criminalises silent prayer and other actions that could influence a person’s decision within 200 metres of an abortion facility.

He was ordered to pay thousands of pounds in legal fees to the prosecution. Now, I wish I could say that this was an isolated, crazy example of a poorly written law being

enacted against a single individual. But no. Last October, just a few months ago, the Scottish government began distributing letters to citizens whose homes were located in so-called safe access zones, warning them that even private prayer in their own homes could amount to breaking the law. Of course, the government urged readers to report any fellow citizens suspected of thought crimes in Britain and across Europe.

Freedom of speech, I fear, is in retreat. I admit that sometimes the loudest voices in favour of censorship have not come from Europe, but from my own country, where the previous administration threatened and

intimidated social media companies into censoring so-called disinformation. Disinformation, such as, for example, the idea that the coronavirus probably jumped out of a laboratory in China. Our own government encouraged private companies to silence people who dared to speak what turned out to be an obvious truth.

So today I come here not only with an observation, but with an offer. And just as the Biden administration seemed desperate to silence people who expressed their opinions, so the Trump administration will do the exact opposite, and I hope we can work together on this.

There’s a new sheriff in town in Washington. And under Donald Trump’s leadership, we may disagree with your opinions, but we will fight to defend your right to make those opinions in the public square. Agree or disagree. Now, we are at the point, of course, where the situation has deteriorated so badly that this December, Romania directly cancelled the results of a presidential election based on the weak suspicions of an intelligence agency and enormous pressure from its continental neighbours. Now, as I understand it, the argument was that Russian disinformation had infected the Romanian elections. But I would ask my European friends to have a little perspective. You may believe that it is wrong for Russia to buy social media advertising to influence your elections. We certainly do. You may condemn it on the world stage, even. But if your democracy can be destroyed with a few hundred thousand pounds of digital advertising from a foreign country, then it was not very strong to begin with.

The good news is that I believe your democracies are far less fragile than many seem to fear. And I truly believe that allowing our citizens to have their say will make them even stronger. Which, of course, brings us back to Munich, where the organisers of this very conference have banned lawmakers representing populist parties on both the left and the right from participating in these conversations. Now, again, we don’t have to agree with everything or anything that people say. But when political leaders represent a significant electorate, it is our duty to at least engage in dialogue with them.

Now, to many of us on the other side of the Atlantic, it increasingly seems that there are old, entrenched interests hiding behind horrible Soviet-era words like disinformation, who simply do not like the idea that someone with an alternative point of view might express a different opinion or, God forbid, vote differently or, worse still, win an election.

Now, this is a security conference, and I am sure you have all come here prepared to talk about exactly how you intend to increase defence spending in the coming years in line with a new target. And that is fantastic, because as President Trump has said, he believes that our European friends must play a greater role in the future of this continent. We don’t think you resent this term ‘burden sharing’, but we think it’s an important part of being in a shared alliance together that Europeans step up while America focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger.

But let me also ask you, how can you even begin to think about the kinds of budget issues

if we don’t know what we’re defending in the first place? I’ve heard a lot in my conversations, and I’ve had many, many fantastic conversations with many people gathered here in this room. I have heard a lot about what you need to defend yourselves against, and of course that is important. But what has seemed a little less clear to me, and certainly to many European citizens, I think, is what exactly you are defending yourselves for. What is the positive vision that animates this shared security pact that we all believe is so important?

I believe deeply that there is no security if you are afraid of the voices, opinions and conscience that guide your own people. Europe faces many challenges. But the crisis this continent is facing right now, the crisis I believe we all face together, is of our own making. If you are running for office out of fear of your constituents, there is nothing America can do for you. Nor, for that matter, is there anything you can do for the American people who elected me and elected President Trump. You need democratic mandates to achieve anything of value in the coming years.

Have we not learned anything about how thin mandates produce unstable results? But there is so much of value that can be achieved with the kind of democratic mandate that I think will come from being more responsive to the voices of your citizens. If you want to enjoy competitive economies, if you want to enjoy affordable energy and secure supply chains, then you need mandates to govern because you have to make tough choices to enjoy all of these things. And of course, we know this very well. In America, you



cannot win a democratic mandate by censoring your opponents or putting them in prison. Whether it's the opposition leader, a humble Christian praying in his home, or a journalist trying to report the news. Nor can you win one by ignoring your core constituency on issues such as who can be part of our shared society.

And of all the urgent challenges facing the nations represented here, I believe there is none more urgent than mass migration. Today, nearly 1 in 5 people living in this country moved here from abroad. That is, of course, an all-time high. It is a similar number, incidentally, in the United States, also an all-time high. The number of immigrants entering the EU from non-EU countries doubled between 2021 and 2022 alone. And, of course, it has increased significantly since then. And we know the situation. It did not materialise in a vacuum. It is the result of a series of conscious

**I believe that dismissing people, dismissing their concerns or, worse still, shutting down the media, cancelling elections or excluding people from the political process protects nothing. In fact, it is the surest way to destroy democracy.**

decisions taken by politicians across the continent and others around the world over the course of a decade. We saw the horrors caused by these decisions yesterday in this very city. And of course, I cannot bring it up again without thinking of the terrible victims who saw a beautiful winter day in Munich ruined. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and will remain with them. But why did all this happen in the first place?

It is a terrible story, but it is one we have heard far too many times in Europe, and sadly too many times in the United States as well. An asylum seeker, often a young man in his mid-twenties, already known to the police, ploughed into a crowd with

a car and destroyed a community. How many times must we suffer these terrible setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilisation in a new direction? No voter on this continent went to the polls to open the doors to millions of uncontrolled immigrants. But do you know what they voted for? In England, they voted for Brexit. And whether you agree with it or not, they voted for it. And across Europe, more and more people are voting for political leaders who promise to end out-of-control immigration. Now, I happen to agree with many of these concerns, but you don't have to agree with me.

I just think people care about their homes. They care about their dreams. They care about their security and their ability to provide for themselves and their children. And they are smart. I think that's one of the most important things I've learned in my short time in politics. Contrary to what you may

hear a couple of mountains away in Davos, the citizens of all our nations do not generally see themselves as trained animals or interchangeable cogs in a global economy. And it is not surprising that they do not want to be sidelined or ignored relentlessly by their leaders. And it is the job of democracy to judge these big issues at the ballot box.

I believe that dismissing people, dismissing their concerns or, worse still, shutting down the media, cancelling elections or excluding people from the political process protects nothing. In fact, it is the surest way to destroy democracy. Expressing one's opinion is not electoral interference. Even when people express opinions outside their own country, and even when those people are very influential – and believe me, I say this with all humour – if American democracy can survive ten years of Greta

**Democracy is based on the sacred principle that the voice of the people matters. There is no room for cordons sanitaires. Either you uphold that principle or you don't. Europeans, the people have a voice. European leaders have a choice. And I firmly believe that we must not be afraid of the future.**

Thunberg's rebukes, you guys can survive a few months of Elon Musk. But what no democracy, American, German or European, will survive is telling millions of voters that their thoughts and concerns, their aspirations, their demands for relief, are invalid or even unworthy of consideration.

Democracy is based on the sacred principle that the voice of the people matters. There is no room for cordons sanitaires. Either you uphold that principle or you don't. Europeans, the people have a voice. European leaders have a choice. And I firmly believe that we must not be afraid of the future. Embrace

what your people are telling you, even when it is surprising, even when you disagree. And if you do, you can face the future with certainty and confidence, knowing that the nation's is behind each of you. And that, to me, is the great magic of democracy. It is not in these stone buildings or these beautiful hotels.

It is not even in the great institutions that we have built together as a shared society. Believing in democracy means understanding that each of our citizens has wisdom and a voice. And if we refuse to listen to that voice, even our most successful battles will achieve very little. As Pope John Paul II once said, in my view one of the most extraordinary champions of democracy on this or any other continent, 'do not be afraid'. We should not be afraid of our people, even when they express opinions that disagree with their leadership. Thank you all. Good luck to all of you. God bless you. ▾



# CONSERVATISM as a POLITICAL CONSTRUCT

Mathieu Bock-Coté

**T**here is a difficulty of writing a history of conservatism. This difficulty is not due to the fact that it differs from one country to another – French conservatism is not German conservatism, which is not English conservatism – but also because European conservatism as a whole may overlap with American conservatism, yet the two do not coincide perfectly. This is especially true since conservatism is not primarily defined by its programme – conservatism is not right-wing utopianism, it does not present itself as a universally replicable ‘model of society’, but, in many respects, as a reaction against the politicisation and complete ideologisation of society, subject to constant social engineering, as if humans had become laboratory animals on which to test theories until the right one is found to bring about the end of history and the reconciliation of humanity, finally freed from its divisions and reconnecting with its primordial, original unity. Conservatism, in its most favourable definition, can be presented as the instinct for survival and preservation of a society that awakens and expresses itself when it is manipulated abusively, when attempts are made to condition it by force, to tear it away from its permanence, when attempts are made to subject it to a revealed ideology that is supposed to change human nature in the long term. The history of conservatism is less a simple history of ideas than a philosophical and sociological exploration of the upheavals caused by modernity – certainly forces of progress, which will lament the advances in medicine,

transport or comfort, but also an undertaking of psychological mutilation based on a misunderstanding of the human heart and soul.

This history recalls the founding character of the French Revolution, a revolution that remains forever unfinished, constantly revived beyond its borders, and which made emancipation, conceived as disembodiment, the ultimate goal of the democratic movement. Man must always break free from his bonds and renounce his own home and property. For modernity, as we often forget, functions like a religious revelation. It no longer thinks of evil as an insurmountable metaphysical given, inscribed in the heart of man – just like good, for that matter – but as an identifiable social reality, a specific system of domination (capitalism, patriarchy, hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, etc.) that need only be overthrown to set man free; a clean slate allowing history to start afresh, in a grand new beginning that is supposed to enable the construction of a perfect society, provided that those enlightened by this revelation are allowed to steer it. This elite called upon to give birth to

**There comes a day when the reactionary wonders whether he wants to pursue a career forever on the margins, as a witness to a fallen world of which he wants to be the last guardian, or whether he wants to rejoin society, to be recognised as a legitimate man, no longer having to justify his existence forever.**

the new world may be a militant elite, as in the days of the party theorised by Lenin, or a technocratic elite, alien to the mystique of the great revolution, but convinced that it can create the best of all possible worlds as long as it is not prevented from administering and reforming society in its own way. The dictatorship of the proletariat and enlightened despotism have more in common than one might think. In both cases, opposition is seen as the “dead wood” of humanity.



Anyone who opposes the new revelation is, at best, an evil person, consciously hostile to the promise of human emancipation, or an ignorant person dominated by their fears and prejudices, who must be socially neutralised or, better still, re-educated. Conservatism, in modernity, is inevitably presented as a pathology. Democracy, for moderns – or at least for those fundamentalists of modernity who are progressives – is less about the inevitable staging of the plurality of values, philosophies and parties in order to reconcile the insurmountable structural tensions of any society, what Max Weber called the polytheism of values, than a pedagogy whose purpose is to reveal the meaning of history to all and to condemn those who lag behind and resist change.

From this point of view, it would probably be pointless, in the present context – unless one were to engage in a strictly academic exercise – to write yet another history of conservative ideas in modernity. Not that the exercise is without interest *in itself*. It would probably begin with a reminder of the essential figure of Edmund Burke, British politician and philosopher, a frustrated modernist, a moderate modernist if you will, horrified by the revolutionaries' *tabula rasa*, and the first theorist, in his own way, not of natural law as the foundation of political community, but of tradition as an ever-evolving experience that it would be criminal to sacrifice and destroy. Unless we favour that

of Joseph de Maistre (and over the decades we would encounter thinkers and politicians associated with the conservative ethos). The history of the right would then take the form of a great original and inaugural rejection of modernity, experienced as a second fall in history: modernity slackening man by 'deverticalising' him, tearing the consciousness of original sin from his heart, entrusting him with a demiurgic responsibility in history, as if he could replace the Creator himself. Haunted by the fantasy of self-generation, he imagines himself all-powerful on this earth, distances himself from his nature and, believing he is doing the greatest good, does the greatest harm. The history of the right, depending on whether one begins with Burke or de Maistre, will be a history conceived under the sign of adaptation, reform, and prudence, or under that of decline, slackening, and the loss of man. I would add that it could also be traced back to the figure of Herder,

who was more complex and less obvious, but who had the intuition of the identity of peoples before others. But I will not venture further down this path, I will simply point it out.

Is it then a question of recalling that the history of the right is not the same depending on whether it is written in the ink of conservatives or reactionaries? In a sense, yes, but not entirely. Burke sees himself as belonging to the party of permanence, which must be nurtured even in an era of "change", because man will always return to it. Or should we rather speak of the party of duration and legitimate prejudices, to which moderns have given a very bad reputation, convinced of the virtues of a great renewal of judgement, with reason having to start afresh in all dimensions of existence. Burke understood two centuries ahead of his time that a society that casts radical suspicion on the entire existing order in the name of its rationalist re-

construction will be both spiritually debased and tyrannical. De Maistre sees himself as belonging to the party of decline: modern man will forever be a fallen man, permanently mutilated in his soul. And yet, this useful distinction can be specious. It is also strategic: ideas do not float alone in the sky, they are carried by men who are sensitive to the social cost of the ideas they adopt. There comes a day when the reactionary wonders whether he wants to pursue a career forever on the margins, as a witness to a fallen world of which he

wants to be the last guardian, or whether he wants to rejoin society, to be recognised as a legitimate man, no longer having to justify his existence forever. It is usually at this point that the reactionary becomes a conservative. But what do they want for the city? A restoration, which rarely takes the form of a simple return to an old order, since its sociological foundations no longer support it or have fragmented? Conservatives are often content to wish for an end to the carnage. But is it their vocation to promote their own ideal of society? For a long time, the right wing wanted to be Christian, even Catholic. It is no longer so, except perhaps sentimentally. Later, perhaps too late, it will become identity-based.

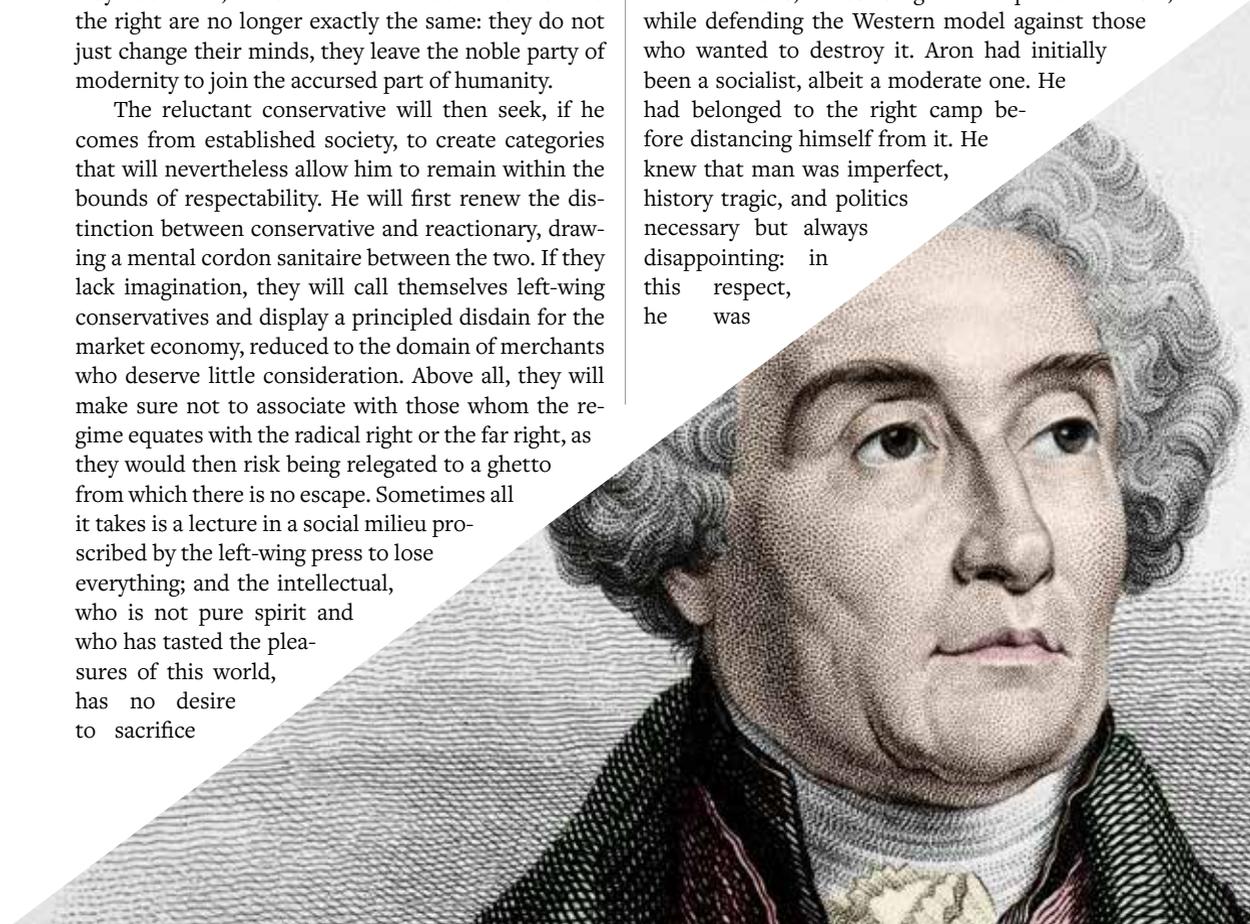
The history of conservatism is also that of those who were outcasts of modernity, who believed themselves to be part of it but ended up falling away from it or being driven out. For modernity is not a state: it

is a permanent movement that translates inherited attachments, forged in history or expressed in the language of nature, such as sex, into the language of alienation (from this point of view, the denial of man's sexual nature is the inevitable outcome of modern teleology, which seeks to make human beings their own creators, reducing them to the primordial mud, before all the determinations that codify the social order and assign them an identity they have not chosen for themselves). If modernity is a form of activism, one need only refrain from moving at its pace to become a conservative (it celebrates those who move faster than it does, in the manner of the *avant-garde* – such is the original reward for the radical left). The conservative, in the modern world, is often a disappointed progressive. Most of the time, one is not born conservative, even if one may have a favourable existential disposition; one becomes so because the regime assigns us to that position. All it takes is a new wave of 'emancipation' to announce itself for them to remobilise and force established figures to align themselves ideologically, to adapt to the new orthodoxy – or even to claim it as their own – if they want to remain at the heart of the regime. As the movement always goes from right to left, this explains why yesterday's left becomes today's centre-left and tomorrow's right. But the left-winger who is no longer left-wing feels this as a symbolic fall, a moral decline. Those who move to the right are no longer exactly the same: they do not just change their minds, they leave the noble party of modernity to join the accursed part of humanity.

The reluctant conservative will then seek, if he comes from established society, to create categories that will nevertheless allow him to remain within the bounds of respectability. He will first renew the distinction between conservative and reactionary, drawing a mental cordon sanitaire between the two. If they lack imagination, they will call themselves left-wing conservatives and display a principled disdain for the market economy, reduced to the domain of merchants who deserve little consideration. Above all, they will make sure not to associate with those whom the regime equates with the radical right or the far right, as they would then risk being relegated to a ghetto from which there is no escape. Sometimes all it takes is a lecture in a social milieu proscribed by the left-wing press to lose everything; and the intellectual, who is not pure spirit and who has tasted the pleasures of this world, has no desire to sacrifice

everything for a moment of mental or ideological relaxation. It is especially when one is no longer on the left that one must keep alive one's left-wing reflexes, one's awareness of the codes of progressive respectability. On this condition, the man who has become conservative may retain his position in society. He must prove that he is not threatening. If he decides to attack orthodoxy head-on – out of exasperation or because he has nothing left to lose – he will then be branded as far-right, which is equivalent to the mark of the beast: a social death sentence from which there is no recovery. These considerations do not seem to me to be useless for understanding the history of ideas, which is first and foremost it must be acknowledged, a history of the positioning of intellectuals and philosophers in the environment in which they wish to be recognised. The history of ideas is not a history of floating concepts, but of concepts formulated in an environment that is more or less receptive to them, and with which one often has to be cunning, especially if one finds oneself in philosophical opposition.

Let us add another dimension: one must first have been on the left in order to have the right to no longer be so. The history of the French intellectual right, from the immediate post-war period until 1983, is closely linked to the figure of Raymond Aron. A philosopher, sociologist and editorialist, he played a major role in the meticulous, almost surgical critique of Marxism, while defending the Western model against those who wanted to destroy it. Aron had initially been a socialist, albeit a moderate one. He had belonged to the right camp before distancing himself from it. He knew that man was imperfect, history tragic, and politics necessary but always disappointing: in this respect, he was



conservative, even if he wanted to be liberal – the liberalism of the time was, however, inseparable from conservatism, and the defence of a free society was not to be confused with the extravagant demands of today's identity-based minorities.

Aron was a liberal conservative, as Daniel Mahoney perfectly analysed in his work on the conservative foundations of liberal society. But in some respects, the figure of Aron represents a mental or symbolic obstacle for anyone who wants to tell the story of conservatism. In fact, we need to reflect on Aron's figure in order to understand why the intellectual right has remained outside the debate of ideas. For there was a conservative thought to the right of Raymond Aron, made inaccessible by his hegemony over his own camp: he was both the great interlocutor and the only one. To the right of Aron, there was apparently a descent into intolerance, primitive thinking, and non-thinking – which made it an unthought territory in the intellectual history of the right (or else it was reduced to the famous far right, which by definition would not think, or would be content to disguise its primitive emotions in a rudimentary theory). However, in another context, we could tell the parallel story of the New Right and the conservative Catholic right, which did not share the same imagination or language, but which, in their own time, took the challenges of the cultural and demographic revolution seriously. The former took the question of identity seriously, the latter anthropological questions. But, having developed their thinking outside the media and intellectual cordon sanitaire, condemned to militant insularity – which is never very fruitful for a philosophy – their ideas never really permeated public life.

The history of ideas is inseparable from the history of the institutional environments in which these ideas unfold. There is no such thing as an axiologically neutral regime: each is rooted in a particular anthropology, each sets the parameters of a public space that defines those of respectability and, therefore, legitimacy. This allows us to distinguish between parties naturally destined to govern (often referred to in Anglo-Saxon countries as the “natural party of government”) and parties destined to exist only in tribunician opposition, as well as forces decreed radically illegitimate, which can be cursed and even legally persecuted if necessary (which is becoming increasingly common, incidentally). Conservatism, in modern times, is only permitted if it assumes a strictly moderating function that is tolerated as a brake, perhaps even as a form of sophisticated pragmatism. We are prepared to make it the authorised party of human permanence, but on condition that it does not hinder the march of progress – at best, it is allowed to slow it down to take account of those lagging behind, but no more than that. As soon as it claims to set a different course, it tips

over into the realm of the diabolical; it will be fought using the methods of political exorcism. Those who have access to the mainstream public sphere do not formulate their theories in the same way as those who only have access to fringe magazines on the verge of samizdat, quasi-clandestine radio stations, and newspapers with limited circulation.

From this point of view, the development of a mainstream ecosystem sympathetic to conservatism in several Western countries has changed the game. Not always having to justify the premises of one's reasoning by exposing it publicly, not always having to formulate it in a way that makes it acceptable to the progressive interviewer, to avoid the slightest misstep being considered a scandal or a slip-up that could lead to the social death penalty for the “slip-up artist”. The social media revolution has profoundly transformed not only the dissemination of ideas, but also the very way in which they are produced, favouring insurgent political and intellectual currents. The context of widespread insurrection created by these networks and the revelation of facts that would never have been made public in the past are changing the terms of the debate and promoting schools of thought that, until now, sought to highlight these facts and based their arguments on their claim to reveal a part of reality that had been obscured by the regime.

### The end of the 1989 cycle and the return of conservatism

I have taken the liberty of offering these lengthy preliminary considerations in order to show that it is necessary to move away from an overly disembodied conception of the history of ideas and doctrines in order to understand the question of conservatism – and especially the way in which it is resurfacing today. For we must see in what context it is resurfacing. Intellectually, it is resurfacing more in the United States than in Europe. It is resurfacing with the now confirmed end of the 1989 cycle and, above all, of its last ideological illusions. In 1989, the Western world was not content to simply watch totalitarian communism collapse and the nations it dominated liberate themselves – that was something to be celebrated. But the victory of 1989 was interpreted as the moment when the globalist promise would finally be realised.

The Babelian utopia was within reach. It was necessary to break down borders, seen as useless barriers, transfer national sovereignties to the institutions of global governance supposed to steer the administrative unification and legal homogenisation of humanity, move from the diversity of peoples to the interchangeability of populations, and transform societies into vast social engineering projects in the name of combating discrimination and recognising diversity – the

culmination of the deconstruction that began in the 1960s. Over the years, this philosophy, which was also an agenda, was presented at numerous international forums, notably Davos, which was, in a way, the Senate of the globalist oligarchy.

But the dream of some was the nightmare of others, who wondered what sense there was in a world based on the deconstruction and then the cancellation of historical identities, emptying democracy of its substance and seemingly devoted to the deconstruction of the last traditional reference points. In other words, ordinary people clearly saw globalism – which translated politically into what I have called the regime of diversity – as a revolutionary ideology, as if the torch of revolution had passed from East to West in 1989. It could be seen as a new Vendée revolt, authentically popular, but obliterated in the philosophical history of modernity. This revolt could be described as populist or even national-populist: the term would not be bad if it were not brandished as genuinely pejorative. For that was the problem: the regime of diversity mobilised the anti-fascist imagination inherited from the work of the Frankfurt School in the face of this revolt. Conservatism had to be presented as pre-fascism, a contained, inhibited form of fascism. All it needed was to be allowed to express itself fully in order to unleash its violent fury. Any form of resolute opposition to progressivism would be considered fascism.

The term ‘far right’ quickly became established: it had the virtue of lumping together all those whom the regime despised, in a category with a vague meaning but an explicit function – to disqualify those to whom it was applied and justify total mobilisation against them, officially to prevent the return of the beast. The extreme right-wingisation of the conservative opposition, its association with fascism through a fallacious genealogy, not only made it possible to stigmatise it and freeze it into an unelectable electoral

bloc – justifying the exclusion of voters guilty of voting wrongly according to the cordon sanitaire method – but above all made the emerging political movement and its specificity incomprehensible, so that it was seen only as the last spasm of a dying world. The confiscation of this subject by a particularly militant academic left made the revolt of the people incomprehensible, to the point where even the conservatives themselves no longer had the words to name their reality.

The major stages of this populist uprising can be traced back to its inception in 1992, with the near victory of the “No” vote in the Maastricht referendum, where all the established elites converged. What

should have been a foregone conclusion was clearly not a foregone conclusion. It has been forgotten, but from that moment on, nearly half of the French people signalled their refusal to enter the new era; the repeated successes of the sovereigntist and nationalist parties in the 1994 and 1999 European elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen's breakthrough in the 2002 presidential election (the anti-mass immigration revolt dates back to the early 1980s, but at the time it was supported by the entire right wing), and then the No vote on the European constitution in 2005 confirmed the depth of this rejection.

We could also mention the European controversy sparked by the success of the FPÖ in Austria in 2000, which led to the threat of diplomatic ostracism if the country formed a democratic coalition that included the FPÖ. Over the years, the breakthrough of national conservatives in Central Europe, national populists in Scandinavia, and certain conservative successes in Italy – which, it must be said, were largely absorbed by the globalist system – marked the entry into the heart of the European political system of opponents of the 1989 regime. In the United States, too, the conservative revolt took shape, beginning in 1992 with the figure of Pat Buchanan, who managed to impose

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the theme of cultural warfare in the Republican primaries, then in 1996 those of national sovereignty, criticism of free trade and mass migration, while arguing for an end to foreign interventionism, which was taking shape in the name of promoting a new world order and would fully unfold in 2003 with the intervention in Iraq. The conservative revolt was temporarily quelled during the triumph of the third way, which was believed to be definitive. However, it was the conservative revolt that triumphed with Brexit, then in Donald Trump's two elections – especially the second, which was less a populist revolt on its own and more a strong national-conservative doctrine.

The academic left, incapable of questioning the virtues of the world it wants to impose, often imagines that the return of conservatism is primarily the result of the freedom of speech enjoyed by a few intellectuals and editorialists who are now invited into the mainstream media, where they can influence and manipulate the masses. This chic conspiracy theory is simply blind to the underlying currents of history and, in the present circumstances, to the objective contradictions of the globalist order. An entire institutional configuration has begun to disintegrate before our eyes. The migration crisis – or more accurately, the migration flood – is undermining the nation state, conceived as the political expression of a particular historical people. Yet we have known since Aristotle that an excessively heterogeneous political community is doomed to dissolve or fracture; multinational states tend to disintegrate, and it is clear to anyone who cares to see that multicultural states will in the long run suffer the same fate, leading either to internal partition or outright secession. The security crisis also compromises the figure of the Leviathan, i.e. the security state based on a minimal but essential pact: the individual concedes a significant part of his freedom to the state in exchange for physical security and the security of his property. The debt crisis reveals the failure of the welfare state, based on the mythology of the New Deal on one side of the Atlantic and the Popular Front on the other – a state that, over the course of the century, has confiscated all the functions of civil society that were part of the organic density of the social fabric, leaving the individual naked before it, as noted by Robert Nisbet, one of the great forgotten sociologists of American conservatism, who saw in the

administrative centralisation of societies entrusted to seemingly expert planners a project to completely rationalise social relations. The psychological collapse of a young generation now disconnected from reality – euphemistically referred to as a “mental health crisis” – finally reveals the consequences of the collapse of the therapeutic state, which sought to rebuild psychologically in the name of emancipating all minorities, apparently victims of the internal colonialism of a dominant vision of Western subjectivity: the deconstruction of norms becoming a task for public health.

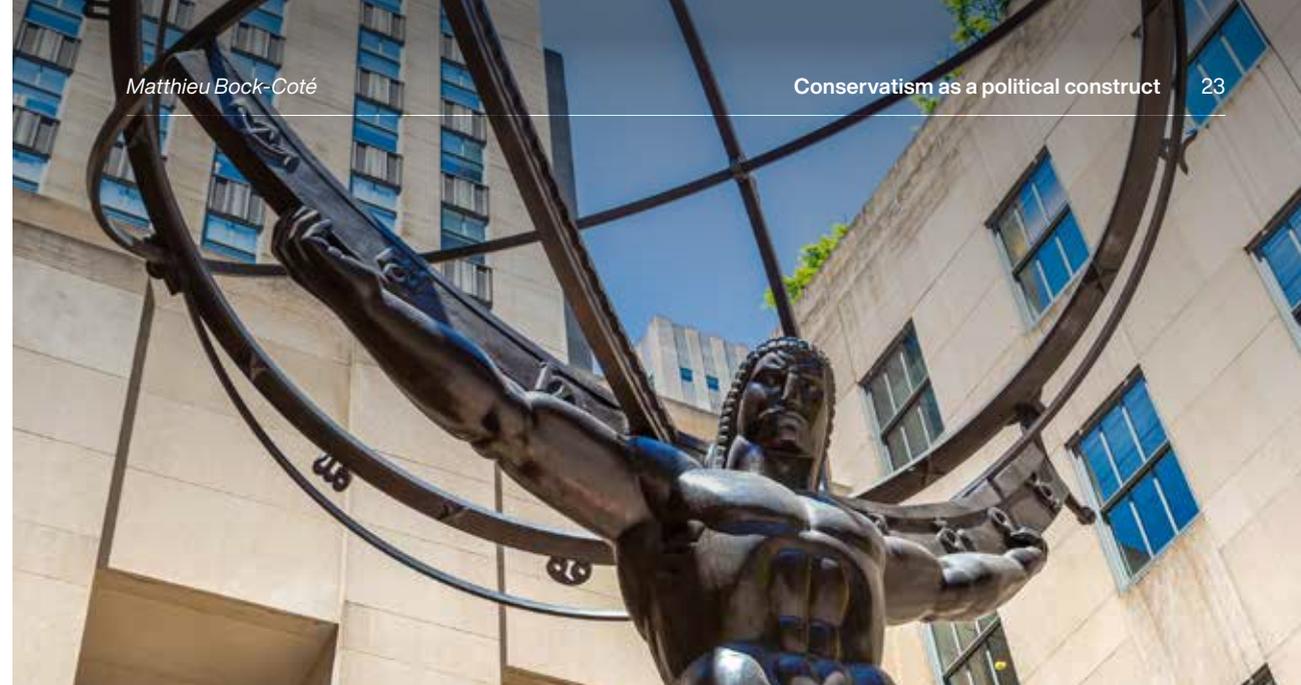
In other words, Western man emerges damaged from the 20th century and even more so from the “long 1989” that marked the transition to the 21st century. In such a

context, political imagination is in turmoil. The social order is disintegrating, and the question of legitimacy is resurfacing, decoupling itself from that of legality. The diversity regime seeks to subdue the new rebels by taking anti-fascist rhetoric to absurd lengths and, if necessary, extending its definition of extremism to include all political forces that do not praise it. The elites, who were once recognised as having innate competence and valued in modernity for their supposed ability to administer a complex society, are now discredited. Historically, this is normally the moment when a counter-elite emerges, forming an alliance with a disaffected fringe of the establishment – this is what supporters of the “union of the right” in France are referring to, which has been easier to achieve in Italy thanks to a more favourable electoral system. The cycle of 1989 is thus breaking down, creating space for a conservatism that is no longer solely devoted to managing the remnants and guarding the ruins. Conservatism can be reborn as a philosophy of renewal, a philosophy that revives peoples seeking to rediscover their deep-rooted identity and their buried, crushed coherence.

### Identity and conservatism

Imagine a staunch Marxist theorist, no longer young, defending the theoretical and scientific value of Marxism at all costs in 1989, on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall, or in 1991, before the collapse of the USSR. Eccentric, learned, but with a dead knowledge, dominated by a theory locked within itself, disconnected from reality, which he could not sacrifice without feeling that he was denying the very core of his

**Objectivism, as a particular form of libertarianism, can and must be understood as an intellectualised and visceral reaction to the collectivist 20th century. Intellectualised, because Ayn Rand constructed a self-referential philosophical system so hermetic that those who converted to it often entered into the equivalent of a sect, socially organised as such.**



Matthieu Bock-Coté

existence, he could obviously not consent to the end of the order to which he had devoted himself, almost like an exegete of sacred texts, almost like a theologian. This is what the last defenders of a worm-eaten order look like intellectually in Europe today, claiming both the strictest universalism and the rule of law, supposed to be the consummate expression of liberal democracy. They quibble over grand declarations and charters, they sing their odes to the values of the Republic (as they say in France) until they are hoarse, without seeing that the system they believed in represented, on a historical scale, the suicide of a civilisation. Of course, we will be told that universalism and its tendency to de-realise historical identities is embedded in the very matrix of modernity, and we will not be wrong. Modernity wants to see only the universal man, even if it can recognise the circumstantial value of his national roots, as necessary mediations for exercising democracy in a given situation. But ultimately, it dreams of producing a global, or potentially global, political community. It is not without reason that Jürgen Habermas was the great official philosopher of the 1989 cycle.

But this vision of man is untenable, and the popular revolt against the order of 1989 was not only sovereignist. It was identitarian (we understand this term detached from the only movement that has appropriated it). Man is always situated, anchored; he can only detach himself from his existential ties to his country by psychologically mutilating himself. From then on, mass immigration can and must be thought of as an unprecedented social experiment, a form of social engineering on a continental or even global scale. Not because it is planned by some opaque, centralised authority, but because the dominant ideology pushes every country that wants to integrate into the system of globalisation to move from an anthropology of the

diversity of peoples to an anthropology of the interchangeability of populations, and to constantly reform each society to prevent it from turning in on itself, to force it to be as open as possible in the name of diversity. Here we find conservatism in its original form: a refusal to disembodiment humanity, which is always an act of violence against humanity. And it is by tracing this refusal, this reminder of situated man – who is also eternal man, as Chesterton wrote – from one decade to another, from one era to another, that we can find the common thread of conservative thought in modernity. Knowing that history works in cycles, the conservatism that is re-emerging today as a temptation among Western peoples is a call for re-rooting.

### Sociology of conservatism

The history of American conservatism is more or less well known in Europe. We are certainly familiar with its major political figures, but less so with its major intellectual figures. Russell Kirk deserves our attention here, because he raises the question of conservatism from a fruitful perspective: that of the political imagination that characterises it. His book *The Conservative Mind* bears witness to this. When it came to rebuilding American conservatism, he looked less to the history of Americanism or the constitutional right – then crushed by the new regime that emerged from the New Deal – than to the history of European conservatism, to which he now wanted to reconnect his country. Kirk was convinced of one thing: conservatism could and should be reborn by connecting with the core of Western civilisation. A magazine such as *Chronicles* revisits the history of the great conservative figures – or more accurately, the right, since that is the term it uses – to broaden an imagination too often confined to the mental parameters of the 20th century.

**The fascination with Tolkien responds to the radical disenchantment with the world engendered by a modernity that completely technicises existence and reduces society to a series of impersonal, disembodied processes, without flesh or soul.**

So here we are: the study of conservatism today is part of the study of conservative imaginations. What imaginations are emerging or re-emerging now that conservatism can return to an offensive stance? Insofar as, as is often said, culture heralds politics, we could identify them by looking back at certain cultural productions of the 1990s and 2000s that, in a way, heralded or reflected the rejection of the people. Three imaginaries can be distinguished: the libertarian, the populist, and perhaps the most fertile, that of conservative romanticism.

First, libertarianism. Ayn Rand is generally considered to be the leading figure of libertarianism in the 20th century. Although her thinking is not as rich as



she believed it to be, she succeeded in turning libertarianism into a romanticism, or at least in renewing its imagination, by recounting the resistance of the individual man, heroised in the guise of the entrepreneur resisting socialism, fiscal persecution and bureaucracy. Objectivism, as a particular form of libertarianism, can and must be understood as an intellectualised and visceral reaction to the collectivist 20th century. Intellectualised, because Ayn Rand constructed a self-referential philosophical system so hermetic that those who converted to it often entered into the equivalent of a sect, socially organised as such. Visceral, insofar as every society produces its share of dissidents and rebels, and the same is true of the welfare state society. With each generation, there is a tendency to re-discover the work and its specific imagery. This is the eternal rediscovery of *Atlas Shrugged*, an epic novel, a thesis novel, a didactic novel, an arid novel, and yet a fascinating philosophical novel, which exerts a truly hypnotic power over some people. Libertarianism has undergone an ideological transformation with its techno-political transformation. Elon Musk, whose role in Donald Trump's campaign is well known, made no secret of his fascination with the philosopher.

Then there is populism. By populism, I mean the revolt of the ordinary, disoriented man who can no longer find his place in the world and seeks to re-establish himself through a re-founding of society. From the early 1990s onwards, we could sense his distress, as evidenced by the film *Falling Down* (1993), which features an ordinary white American man, played by Michael Douglas. A former weapons engineer, he was fired for obscure reasons, divorced, no longer had access to his daughter, and was travelling through the already declining suburbs of California, revolting against the decline in his purchasing power, attacked by what were not yet called thugs, attached to the America of his childhood and wondering when it had gone wrong. He descends into a self-destructive rebellion. But, interestingly, when a local neo-Nazi tries to hijack his rebellion by wanting to see him as the admirable militiaman of his cause, he digs in his heels and reacts violently. The ordinary man is in distress, but that does not make him a fanatic, let alone a racist. Nevertheless, he will go to the end of his distress, in a consciously suicidal gesture, suggesting that this rebellion is futile. If this film is worth mentioning here, it is because it records, from the beginning of the 1989 cycle, the rebellion of ordinary people who do not recognise themselves in the world to come.

Tolkien's work, and particularly *The Lord of the Rings*, is probably the one that best expresses and reveals what could be called a typically European conservatism – even if it was brought back to Europeans through Hollywood technology, as is often the case. Tolkien built his work by delving into the mythical foundations of European civilisation and redeploying them in a finely

constructed imaginary world that has appealed to every generation since its publication. The fascination with Tolkien responds to the radical disenchantment with the world engendered by a modernity that completely technicises existence and reduces society to a series of impersonal, disembodied processes, without flesh or soul. Modernity works by dissociation: it dissociates people, atomises societies, and then claims to connect them through technocratic reason or collectivist utopias. It is radically hostile to organic realities, to the social bonds woven throughout history, and to the evocative symbols connected to what was once called the soul or psychology of peoples. Tolkien's imagination responds to this. Men dream both of the return of the King of Gondor and of the tranquillity of the Shire. They dream of a restoration of sovereignty and the tranquillity of a home, of a familiar land inherited from their fathers, which they can pass on to their sons. And from time to time, men, dwarves and elves can unite, reviving ancient alliances when the civilised world is threatened, even if the face of that threat may change. A figure such as Philippe de Villiers, in French politics, is in his own way a bearer of Tolkienian sensibility: the rediscovery of the history of Puy-du-Fou, Villiers' fight to restore poetry to the heart of French identity, corresponds to this strong but simple intuition: a country without imagination is a zombie country, or worse, a country frozen to death.

**Conclusion**

I come to the conclusion of this article. The history of the right, of right-wing ideas, as they say, is not self-evident, nor is that of conservatism as a political philosophy. Conservatism is not primarily a programme, but an affect, a refusal, an anthropology. Its intellectual vitality is greater today in the United States than in Europe, insofar as the American right has freed itself from the anti-fascist spell that leads one to believe that any fundamental questioning of progressivism would lead to fascism, or even Nazism. However, its vitality will only be fully visible once it has shed the layers of inadequate meaning that cover it, due to the institutionalised misinterpretations that have taken hold of its definition for several decades.

It is here, at this precise moment, that a history of conservatism can begin. ▀



**Matthieu Bock-Coté**  
Sociologist, writer, and conservative political commentator.



# CONSERVATISM'S ROLE IN GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

David Engels

**T**here was a time when Europe was not only a continent but an idea — the political heart of the world, the forge of truth, beauty, and power. Its cities radiated faith and knowledge, its armies set the boundaries of empires, and its thinkers defined what it meant to be human. Today, this same Europe seems to exist only as an ashamed memory of itself, a shadow cast by the monuments of its great founders often besmirched by their smug and self-satisfied descendants. It speaks often of values, but it no longer knows what they really mean beyond passing parliamentary majorities; it possesses wealth, at least for its elite, but not a meaningful purpose; it lives, but no longer believes in whatever it means to be truly alive.

The geopolitical eclipse of Europe is not a sudden event; it is the slow consequence of centuries of inner fatigue, of a spiritual entropy that has dissolved the unity between the true, the good, and the beautiful. Once the bearer of a universal mission — organising the journey of the individual towards transcendence — Europe has chosen comfort over meaning, process over purpose, and sentiment over faith. This transformation has also redefined Europe's position in the world. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Europe has started to prefer power over interiority; now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, once its civilisational potential exhausted and its technology copied by other civilisations, it has lost both.

Thus, for the first time since the early Middle Ages, Europe is no longer the subject of history, but its object. It moralises without armies, legislates without borders, and imposes sanctions that it ultimately has to pay itself. The bureaucratic empire seated in Brussels, with its endless directives and its sterile vocabulary of “values”, “rule of law” and “diversity,” believes it can replace the tragic realism of history with an administrative dream of universal harmony; that it

can impose its own, passing whims as “human rights” unto all other civilisations. Yet, as the German jurist Carl Schmitt warned, the neutralisation of politics is itself a political act — one that leaves the field open to those who still believe in power.

The paradox of our time is thus that Europe, the cradle of geopolitics, has ceased

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to think geopolitically. It speaks the language of moral universalism in a world that has returned to the logic of civilisational struggle. While Russia and China proclaim their imperial traditions, while the United States asserts its strategic and cultural interests with growing clarity, while Islam is conquering ever larger parts of Europe and Africa through sheer demographics, and while India and Brazil start to carve out their own continental empires, Europe persists in believing that force can be replaced by law (but only the ones voted in Brussels), and deterrence by dialogue (but only when the outcome correspond to its own worldview).

The results are visible to all: a continent unable to defend its borders, profoundly transformed by mass migration, dependent on imported energy, unable to guarantee its access to rare strategic resources, vulnerable to technological blackmail, and militarily subordinate to a NATO whose priorities are defined elsewhere.

This dependence would be less tragic if Europe's and America's interests still coincided. For decades, they did — during the Cold War, both shared the same enemy and the same moral framework, and Europe, after its moral discredit in the Second World War, was mostly content to leave the difficult decisions to Washington. But the Trump era has revealed to all what most had known since the 2000s: even formally, the transatlantic alliance is no longer an alliance of equals. "America First" is not an insult; it is the natural expression of a nation that still possesses a will to survive; what is scandalous is not that America defends its interests, but that Europe has forgotten it even has any.

From Washington's perspective, the declining Europe has thus become a strategic periphery — a convenient market, a buffer zone, a moral laboratory for ideas that can be tested without risk. The United

States is not hostile to Europe; it simply treats it as a junior partner, useful for rhetorical legitimacy and financial contribution. For all its idealism, the European Union functions today as a kind of vassal democracy: sovereign enough to preach, too weak to decide, not at all unlike the Greek city states once Rome took over not as an ally, but as a master.

The causes of this situation are not merely political or military; they are civilisational. The West's crisis of sovereignty begins with a crisis of belief. A civilisation that has forgotten what it stands for and renounced any 'absolute truth' cannot project power without hypocrisy: Once God is replaced by sheer power, nothing remains once this power is gone except empty words. Europe's ruling class still invokes 'European values', but these values have been emptied of content or even turned upside down: tolerance means de-Christianisation, human dignity means abortion and euthanasia, diversity means Islamisation, free speech means cancel culture, rule of law means sanctions against political enemies, equality between men and women means gender theory and LGBTQ cult, protection of the patrimony means the hate of our own history, democracy

means billionaire rule, etc. As a result, the continent's foreign policy oscillates between moral vanity and strategic paralysis and is increasingly ridiculed by the other powers.

The philosopher Raymond Aron once said that Europe, having renounced war, entered a dangerous, quasi post-historical illusion — as if the rest of the world had joined its pacifist utopia. The wars in Yugoslavia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Middle East should have brutally ended this dream, but the message seems slow to seep into the minds of the Europeans. Instead of reminding us that power is not an anachronism, and that civilisation without force is merely decoration, Europe retreats further and further into abstraction — and into ridicule. It multiplies resolutions, funds NGOs, invests a fortune into making its military forces gender equal, and exports seminars on LGBTQ rights to countries that are busy building war drones.

Behind this failure lies a deeper theological wound: the loss of faith in transcendence. Europe's political institutions were born from the Christian conviction that power is legitimate only if it serves something higher than itself — that the ruler is accountable to God, that justice has an objective content. Once that vertical link

is broken, power becomes a mere function of interests, and society dissolves into competing appetites. Globalism is simply the last phase of this disintegration — the reduction of civilisation to a global marketplace governed by sentimentality, algorithms, and the ruthless appetite for money and power of elites for whom democratically elected positions are only transitory stages on their path towards even more money and power.

The current European order reflects precisely this confusion. It is neither empire nor federation, neither democracy nor oligarchy, but a hybrid system whose only constant is spiritual void, material stagnation, political repression and moral infantilism. The ideal European citizen is not the patriot, the believer, or the scholar, but the compliant consumer who recycles correctly and votes responsibly — for the left, of course. And yet, beneath the polished surface, anger grows, the silent resentment of peoples who feel expropriated of their identity, taxed for their own disappearance, and instructed to be grateful for it.

Geopolitically, this anger is dangerous, for it can be captured by forces hostile to Europe's unity.

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The decline of legitimacy always opens the door to the politics of resentment. What we are witnessing today is the return of a situation reminding the crisis of the late Roman Republic, tumbling inexorably towards civil war and ready to settle a lot of old accounts through violence. And yet, the eclipse of Europe may also be a prelude to an important step forward towards its ultimate destiny: Every civilisation experiences moments of exhaustion, when the antithetical forces rejecting transcendence reach their culmination point and risk to destroy the civilisation from the within. But in such times, the end is not inevitable, as the antithesis can be overcome by a new, final synthesis, where modernity is combined with a rediscovery of initial purpose and thus the inauguration of a last, final stage, similar to the Roman Empire, the Han dynasty, the Gupta, or the Ramessides. For Europe, that closing synthesis can neither come from globalist utopia nor from nationalist nostalgia: it must come from a new form of civilisational patriotism allying tradition and reason.

If Europe is to survive as a political subject, it must first remember what it means to be a civilisation; it must learn once again to think in centuries, not in electoral cycles, and to act with the awareness that culture, demography, faith and power are inseparable. But above all, it must regain the courage to define its own interests — not against America, but beside it; not against the world, but for itself. For only a Europe conscious of its destiny can still be an ally worth having. The choice that awaits us is thus not between right and left, or between reform and stagnation, but between survival and self-dissolution. And in this twilight, it is the conservatives — those who still remember the meaning of the sacred, of hierarchy, of duty — who must prepare the groundwork for the dawn.

### **If Globalism Wins: Europe as a Moral Theme Park**

Let us imagine, for a moment, that globalism prevails entirely across Europe. The scenario is not implausible; it is, in fact, the logical endpoint of the ideology that currently dominates our institutions, universities, and media. Globalism, in its European form, is not an external imposition, it is an internal heresy: the final, secularised phase of Christianity, stripped of transcendence but preserving its universalism and moral vocabulary. What remains is a humanitarian religion without heaven, a moral economy without metaphysics, a negative anthropology without redemption.

In this future, the European Union becomes not the federation its Christian-democrat founding father once promised it to be, but a woke bureaucracy. Its legitimacy does no longer rest on faith or consent, but on a green-leftist moral narrative: climate justice,



gender equality, inclusivity, sustainability, multiculturalism — a liturgy of virtue endlessly repeated by political clergy and media catechists. Law has ceased to express reason and only illustrates emotion; legitimacy no longer comes from the people, but from experts, from NGOs, or an opaque ‘international community’; dissent is not argued with, but pathologised as ‘hate speech’. The result is a continent that speaks incessantly of freedom while living under permanent surveillance; a surveillance system still avoiding gulags or torture, but based on an implicit social credit system powered by AI, social media and bureaucracy; a system Tocqueville foresaw as the soft despotism of comfort: an empire of safety where all risk, conflict,

and transcendence are suppressed in the name of well-being.

However, the moral vocabulary of this regime hides a nasty economic reality. Beneath the surface of progressive humanitarianism operates a powerful alliance between global finance, digital oligarchy, and bureaucratic governance, colluding to destroy what remains of the middle class. The moral rhetoric of ‘inclusivity’ serves as a perfect distraction from the real redistribution of power: from the citizen to the corporation, from the nation to the network. ESG directives, climate credits, and social scoring systems function as new forms of feudal obligation — the moral justification for the concentration of economic control.

**If globalism dissolves  
and nationalism  
fragments, what  
remains for Europe?**

**THANK EU**



**ALL CITIZENS WELCOME HERE**

The postmodern peasant no longer pays tithes to his baron, but endless subscriptions to platforms and taxes to supranational agencies, ‘owning nothing without being truly happy’.

The green transition illustrates this logic perfectly. Officially, it seeks to save the planet; in practice, it destroys the industrial base of Europe, submits the citizens to the great corporations via the devaluation of property through endless regulations, transfers production to Asia, and makes the continent dependent on rare strategic goods either controlled by China or the US. The result is not sustainability but billionaire socialism — a society of limits for the people and exemptions for the powerful.

At the social level, the consequences are equally devastating. The demographic implosion of Europe continues, compensated not by birth but by immigration. Yet immigration, far from being a solution, becomes a tool of moral blackmail. It is no longer presented as a political choice but as an ethical imperative — the ‘debt of the coloniser’, the ‘duty of humanity’. The nation, once defined as a community of destiny, is redefined as a logistical space where populations circulate according to the needs of the market and the dictates of compassion; a world, in which identity itself becomes a suspect category, especially when it is autochthonous.

This ideology of globalism transforms Europe into what I once called a ‘moral theme park’ — a civilisation that survives only as spectacle. Its cathedrals become museums, its traditions festivals, its languages brands. The sacred is commodified, and the beautiful is algorithmically optimised. Tourists still marvel at the ruins, but no one builds new monuments, and the ugly truth of pauperisation, desertification and Islamisation are hidden or tabooed.

In this future, democracy itself becomes simulation. Elections are held, debates are televised, but the range of acceptable opinion shrinks every year. The real decisions are taken elsewhere — in committees, boards, expert panels that answer to no one — and depend on the support of the billionaire ‘Caesars’ of the modern West. While the patriots are discredited as fascists, the self-declared ‘democratic’ parties only differ in slogans but not in worldview, are led by variations of the same managerial class, and resemble products made by IA. The citizens, deprived of any real political influence, retreat into private life or virtual

activism, while the idea of the *polis* — of a common destiny shared by free individuals — fades into the background noise of entertainment.

Geopolitically, this Europe has no future. Its armies will rust, its technologies will become outdated, its industries will be gradually sold. Admittedly, it may still remain relatively wealthy for a time, living on accumulated capital, but eventually, the loss of resilience and the accumulated impact of missed reforms will become visible everywhere.

And yet, the greatest danger of globalism is not domination but discredit. A civilisation that pretends to speak for humanity but cannot even secure its own continuity invites contempt, even more as it triggered so many resentments while it dominated the earth. When the rest of the world looks at Europe — decadent, self-hating, obsessed with guilt and comfort — it sees neither a master nor a teacher, but a stern warning. The West that once converted the world through

its faith now preaches atheism with missionary zeal; the continent that invented the cathedral now worships the windmill — nobody can criticise migrants for not wanting to integrate into such a collective folly.

If globalism triumphs completely, Europe will thus not be conquered, but it will simply dissolve. There will be no final battle, no spectacular collapse — only the quiet absorption of a once dynamic civilisation into

the algorithms of an international governance shared in reality by the new multipolar stakeholders and increasingly pauperised. Europe’s nations will still exist as administrative zones; its peoples as demographic data; but the reality will be one of utter fragmentation, where the consumption potential of the Europeans will feed the bank accounts of Chinese or American companies, not dissimilar to the exploitation of the Sumerian city-states or the Nile-valley under countless generations of foreign invaders.

And yet, as so often in history, it is precisely in such moments of exhaustion that the possibility of reversal appears. For when a civilisation reaches the limit of its abstraction, when it has denied all that made it human, the hunger for reality returns. Out of the ruins of globalism may still arise the will to rediscover the concrete: faith, community, beauty, and family. But for that to happen, Europe must first experience the full sterility of its own utopia — it must understand that salvation cannot be found in universalism without God.

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## If the Sovereignists Win: the Balkanisation of Europe

Let us now imagine the opposite future — one that many on the right, weary of Brussels and disillusioned with globalism, still call ‘hope’. Suppose the so-called ‘populists’ triumph, the sovereignists take power, and the European Union, crippled by its contradictions, begins to unravel. Borders are restored, national parliaments recover authority, each people reclaims its independence, the bureaucrats of Brussels pack their offices, the flags of the Union are lowered, and the continent proclaims itself ‘free’ again. At first, the atmosphere may be euphoric: Europe seems to awaken from its technocratic nightmare. But soon, the jubilation will fade. For what follows will not be renewal, but confusion and conflict. For in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, national sovereignty, without a civilisational frame, will only lead to vassalisation.

The populist revolution that many dream of would not restore the order of Europe, but expose its fragmentation. Each state, suddenly liberated from the

domination — and at the end, their newly won autonomy only hid the reality of Roman provincial administration. Their civilisation survived, admired by their conquerors and patrons, but their sovereignty was to remain a mere formal hull for the centuries to come. The same is the case with the rivalling Chinese states of the ‘Warring Kingdoms’, finally subjected by the semi-barbarian Qin.

To be clear: the revolt against globalism is legitimate, even necessary, and the nation state is, at least for now, still the cornerstone of European democracy and identity. No civilisation can survive when its elites despise its people and its roots, and when their legitimate forms of civic solidarity are ignored. But revolt is not enough, and destruction does not guarantee creation: The return of sovereignty cannot, by itself, restore meaning, because sovereignty is not a metaphysical absolute — it is a function of power, purpose, and unity. When each European state defines itself only by its difference from its neighbour, Europe ceases to be a civilisation and becomes a collection of petty rivalries ultimately leading to vassalisation.

# “The bureaucrats of Brussels are not the cause, but the symptom of a deeper disease: the loss of the European soul.”

European framework, would pursue its own course — some turning to Washington for protection, others to Moscow for gas, others to Beijing for privileged tariffs, others to Turkey for geopolitical support, and still others to the Gulf monarchies for capital. The result would not be de Gaulle’s ‘Europe of Nations’ patriots so often speak about, but an archipelago of feudal dependencies and petty rivalries. A continent that once was united by faith, culture, and a common destiny would dissolve into a chessboard of external allegiances. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Europe was still on top of the game, dominating the world through technology, demographics, education, military, and colonies, while national rivalries led to ever greater expansion; today, however, the world fights back and would be all too happy to make the European nations suffer the same kind of dependence it has never forgiven them.

We have seen something similar before: the Greek city states, once united by Alexander and his successors, preferred to call in outer forces from east and west in order to get rid of the Macedonian

The national conservatives who imagine that the dissolution of the European Union will automatically produce freedom mistake structure for essence, because they forget that Europe’s crisis is not merely bureaucratic, but spiritual. This means that the bureaucrats of Brussels are not the cause, but the symptom of a deeper disease: the loss of the European soul. Replacing them with national bureaucrats will not cure the illness, it may even make it worse, for the centrifugal passions unleashed by disintegration will soon require external guarantees — and external guarantees always come with foreign chains. Russia offers energy and orthodoxy, hoping to reconstitute a Eurasian sphere; China offers investment and infrastructure, buying influence through debt; the United States offers protection, but at the price of vassalage; Turkey offers a pathway to the Middle East and the management of migration; the Gulf states offer liquidity and ideology in equal measure. Each of these powers sees in Europe’s disunity not a tragedy, but an opportunity;

and indeed, why should they not? History’s great law is simple: when the center no longer holds, the periphery intervenes.

The irony is cruel: the sovereignist victory could well produce the very dependency it sought to escape. By dismantling the fragile unity of the continent, the nationalists would deliver it, piece by piece, to stronger empires. The dream of independence would culminate in a new colonialism — not territorial, but financial, cultural, military and digital. The global giants would play off one capital against another, exploiting their rivalries, dictating policy through markets, data, and migration flows. Europe would survive, but as a collection of protectorates, each boasting of its sovereignty while obeying invisible masters.

This is not mere speculation. Already today, we see how individual European states, in their quest for autonomy, align themselves with external patrons. Hungary and Slovakia seek energy from Russia; France courts the Gulf; Italy and Greece depend on Chinese investments; Poland binds itself to Washington; Germany, after the Nord Stream sabotage, finds itself both economically weakened and militarily subordinated. Even within the European Union, solidarity has become a fiction — North against South, East against West, center against periphery. The moment the integrative pressure of Brussels disappears, these tensions will explode.

And yet, one must be fair: the sovereignists are not wrong in diagnosing the illness. Their rebellion stems from a genuine instinct of preservation — the will to defend culture, identity, and dignity against the homogenising arrogance of globalism. But like all rebellions that lack a positive principle, it risks destroying what little still unites us. The tragedy of the sovereignists is that they mistake centripetal energy for unity. They believe that to restore the nation is to restore Europe. But Europe has never been a mere collection of nations; it has always been a civilisation seeking again and again to restore the unity it lost when its initial core, the Holy Roman Empire, was destroyed by religious, political and ideological divisions. Of course, the nations have played an important role since the beginning of the European civilisation, but many of them are rather the result than the precondition of the nation state. Indeed, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, instead of a handful of clearly delimited ‘nations’, Europe was characterised by countless diverging regional and dialectal groups sometimes interrelated by linguistic familiarity or historical experience, but ultimately very different from each other; only the nation building imposed by the ‘Enlightened’ ideology exported by the French revolution led to the great unification and simplification whose results we witness today. Defending the ‘nation’ as the ultimate defining characteristic of Europe is thus not only anachronistic, it is also dangerous in

the current situation, as nationalism risks to destroy not only Europe, but ultimately the nation state itself.

The lesson of history is clear: fragmentation is not freedom, as the decline of empire rarely brings renaissance, but rather confusion, dependency, and decay. To avoid this fate, Europe must find a way to reconcile national sovereignty with civilisational solidarity; if globalism is the pathology of the universal, nationalism is the pathology of the particular. The first dissolves identity in abstraction; the second fossilises it in isolation. Both are symptoms of the same disease: the loss of a transcendent center.

What, then, remains for Europe? Between the globalist tower and the nationalist labyrinth, there must exist another path — one that reconciles unity and difference, hierarchy and freedom. That path, as we shall see, is Hesperialism: the reawakening of Europe as a civilisation, not a market; as an organic order, not a rationalist system; as a destiny, not an administration.

## The Hesperialist Alternative: Europe as a Civilisational Power

If globalism dissolves and nationalism fragments, what remains for Europe? Between the dream of the borderless market and the nightmare of balkanised sovereignty, a third path appears — the Hesperialist path. The name comes from the Hesperides, the mythical lands of the setting sun: not a geographical region, but rather a typically symbol of Europe’s eternal longing for all that is ‘beyond’. Hesperialism thus means the conscious re-awakening of Europe as a civilisation rather than as a Kantian system of administration or a mere economic association of states. It is both political realism and spiritual revival — a synthesis of order and transcendence.

Europe’s transition to its final synthesis must thus begin with a redefinition of what it is. Europe is not a collection of markets, nor an aggregate of legal codes, nor even a federation of nations; it is a cultural organism with its typical characteristic identity and destiny, animated by our unique Faustian longing and rooted in the four converging sources of the Greek love of truth, the Roman sense of order, the Christian revelation of personhood and the barbarians’ sense of liberty. Hesperialism seeks to restore their harmony: philosophy that again serves the search for truth, politics that again serves justice, law that respects the realities of nature, faith that again serves transcendence, and a liberty that again dares to reassert its dignity.

This vision is not nostalgic; it does not mean a naïve return to medieval Christendom or to imperial nostalgia that are forever gone, but rather the translation of Europe’s ancient soul into the language of modern power. The Hesperialist wants a Europe conscious of its sacred genealogy and therefore able to project

power without shame. In this sense, Hesperialism is neither reactionary nor utopian; it is organic traditionalism — the renewal of life through memory.

Politically, Hesperialism rejects both supranational bureaucracy and sterile nationalism. It conceives Europe as a commonwealth of sovereign peoples bound by civilisation, not by globalist ideology. Each nation would retain its own constitution, language, and culture, but would acknowledge a higher order of belonging — a shared responsibility for the destiny of the continent. Such an order would rest not on uniformity but on hierarchy and subsidiarity: what can be done locally must not be centralised, but what requires unity — defence, foreign policy, borders, continental communication, strategic resources, future technologies — must be carried out collectively.

This vision echoes the medieval principle of the ‘Sacrum Imperium’ as it has shaped our continent for more than thousand years, allying subsidiarity strength and faith with elective government. Hesperialism thus understands federalism not as dilution, but as a force through coordination. The European army it envisions would not be a duplicate of NATO, but an autonomous force rooted in European interests; its diplomacy would not mimic Washington, but seek balance between East and West. It is a Europe capable of saying ‘yes’ to alliances but ‘no’ to subordination.

Indeed, geopolitically, Hesperialism starts from a simple axiom: a civilisation that cannot defend itself

does not deserve to survive. Europe must recover its strategic sovereignty at all prize: control over borders, energy, technology, defence and information, implying also the ability to choose alliances freely and to endure crises without blackmail. With the United States, Hesperialism would thus envision partnership, not dependency: two civilisations of the West cooperating as equals. With Russia, Europe would target coexistence through strength, complementarity and respect for limits; with China, economic engagement tempered by cultural vigilance; with Africa and the Middle East, a policy of reciprocity, not guilt. The goal is not confrontation but balance, the restoration of a concert of civilisations in which Europe again becomes a pole rather than a province.

In practice, this would of course require re-industrialisation, demographic recovery, and the rebuilding of the European periphery — the Mediterranean, the

Balkans, the Caucasus — as zones of stability rather than as migration corridors. It means replacing moral rhetoric with geopolitical strategy, NGOs with statesmen, emotions with endurance, multipolarity with civilisational patriotism, secularism with proud reference to the Christian tradition. Europe must once again dare to think imperially — not in terms of conquest, but of responsibility for a large supranational order.

Of course, no geopolitical project can endure without a spiritual renaissance. Hesperialism affirms that the crisis of the West is first a crisis of meaning; the restoration of the sacred is thus indispensable and can only proceed through a positive relation with the Christian tradition. The continent cannot live forever in the empty neutrality of secular technocracy; it must recover the sense of being a ‘custos sacri’, a guardian of the sacred. Obviously, a mass re-Christianisation of all Europeans is beyond the scope of the feasible, even more so as Europe has always be characterised by a clear distinction about the sphere of action of the

political and the religious: no church power should interfere with the democratic decisions of the people. But at the same time, these decisions are only to be considered valid if they are able to refer to the framework guaranteed by transcendence and natural law: actively de-Christianising our civilisation or negating the relevance of created nature and physical reality for legislation, as has been the case so often during these last decades, should be impossible.

Indeed, without referring our political decisions ultimately to the existence of an absolute truth, all politics must degenerate into relativism, nihilism and finally mere opportunism were truth is decided by the one who controls the media.

Economically, Hesperialism advocates solidarity over speculation. It draws inspiration from the Christian social doctrine: private property as duty, not privilege; work as participation in creation; profit as service, not idolatry. It rejects both neoliberal atomism and collectivist levelling. The goal is to rebuild a strong middle class, rooted in family, region, and profession — the social body that once made Europe resilient. Similarly, technological progress must serve human dignity, not dissolve it. Artificial intelligence, genetics, and digital governance must remain subordinated to moral limits, as a civilisation that plays with transhumanism while neglecting childbirth signs its own death warrant. The Hesperialist economy

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therefore links innovation to demography: tax systems and social policies that reward family, continuity, and transmission.

At its core, Hesperialism is an ethics of limits. Against the boundless expansion of desire promoted by global capitalism and ethic hedonism, and against the sterile woke moralism of postmodern ideology, it re-affirms that freedom exists only within civilisational forms and boundaries. True liberty is not the abolition of constraint but its voluntary acceptance in the name of a higher good. This applies as much to individuals as to nations: self-discipline and the capacity for distinguishing between norm and exception is the first condition of sovereignty. The Hesperialist therefore calls for a return to virtue — not as private sentiment, but as public law. Courage, temperance, justice, and faith must again become political categories. A society that rewards vice and ridicules virtue cannot survive; it may remain rich for a time, but it will cease to be truly civilised and sooner or later disintegrate because of its growing polarisation.

### **The Coming Storm: crisis, caesarism, and the conservative opportunity**

Every civilisation that has reached a high degree of abstraction must one day return to the concrete. The dream of universal management — of history tamed by humanism, relativism and administration — always ends in the same way: in polarisation, paralysis, revolt, and finally in the longing for a new order. Europe today approaches that threshold. Behind the apparent normality of its institutions, one feels the tremors of a coming earthquake: inflation, migration, debt, disillusion, and demographic exhaustion. The surface is calm; underneath, everything ferments. The question is no longer whether a storm will come, but who will command when it breaks.

Can such a ‘Hesperialist’ transformation still occur peacefully? History would suggest otherwise. Every ‘Augustan’ moment in the evolution of a civilisation follows a period of trial. The Roman world had to pass through the fires of the late Republic, Iran had to experience the Mazdakite rebellion, China the horrors of the Warring States, Egypt the turmoil of the post-Amarna years. Likewise, Europe may have to endure decades of unrest — economic crisis, demographic shock, cultural conflict — before a new equilibrium emerges. The danger is immense, but so is the opportunity.

For when the globalist edifice collapses and the nationalist reaction proves insufficient, the peoples of Europe will search for a new synthesis — something that combines stability with meaning, freedom with hierarchy. If conservatives are ready, if they possess

vision rather than nostalgia, they may become the architects of that synthesis. If not, others — less scrupulous, less humane — will take their place. The task of conservatives is therefore to prepare this moral and political restoration; to hold fast to the memory of form while the world dissolves around them, so that when the hour strikes, they may build upon the ruins of the past a new order.

What will be the mechanism of history, if an organic Hesperialist transformation fails? When the creative energy of a civilisation utterly wanes, when faith turns to nihilism, economy to organised corruption and institutions to oppression, a new type of leader arises — the Caesars. Their legitimacy no longer comes from law or lineage, but from

success, charisma, wealth, power and the ability to impose order amidst chaos. They do not destroy democracy; they replace it with acclamation. The people, weary of impotence and corruption, willingly exchange procedure for protection. But what begins as an emergency measure quickly becomes a new form of rule: pragmatic, personal, post-constitutional — and it triggers other Caesars to do the same, transforming thus what initially was a fight over political ideas into a purely personal fight over individual power from which, finally, a civilisational synthesis will emerge, though not by the means of peaceful election and consensus, but of exhaustion and submission...

This transition will not necessarily be violent, but it will be decisive. The old liberal order, already hollowed out by technocracy and moral relativism, cannot endure indefinite crisis. Its procedures presuppose consensus, and consensus has vanished. When the next economic contraction strikes — when the welfare state becomes unsustainable, when migration overwhelms public services, when energy shortages collide with social unrest — the temptation will be irresistible: to call forth the strong hand that promises to restore order. That hand may emerge from the right or the left, from the barracks or from the boardroom, but it will be hailed as salvation.

For conservatives, this coming ‘Caesarian moment’ represents both danger and opportunity. Danger, because the cult of authority easily degenerates into tyranny; opportunity, because it may open the only

window through which Europe can rebuild. The key question is not whether Caesarism will come, but whether it will be guided by civilisation or by barbarism, and whether the impending upheavals will secure true civic participation and respect for individual freedoms, or whether it will be imposed by mere violence. Rome too knew several candidates for ultimate power before Octavian reaped the final victory; be it Pompey, Caesar or Marc Antony: all had their advantages and their flaws, but the longer the conflicts took, the more it was inevitable that their outcome would be military dictatorship.

The conservative's duty, therefore, is not to deny the coming transformation but to prepare and canalise

world and, hopefully, build the framework for a final civilisational synthesis.

But what if the storm turns against us — if one of the Caesars to come is hostile to everything we defend? Then resistance will again become duty. The conservative does not worship power for its own sake; he accepts it only when it serves truth. To obey injustice is not conservatism but cowardice or opportunism. Yet the greatest danger today is not oppression but entropy — not the tyrant, but the void. Even an unjust order can be corrected; chaos cannot. That is why, paradoxically, the conservative may sometimes welcome authority, not because it is perfect, but because it makes civilisation possible.

The decisive factor will thus be the moral quality of the elites who arise from the crisis. In the late Republic, moral exhaustion produced civil war; yet out of that war emerged Augustus, who restored peace by binding power to piety. The same could happen again. It is to be expected that the twenty-first century will not be ruled by assemblies but by powerful personalities whose influence over

media, technology, institutions and finances are bigger than anything we experienced during these last decades. Whether those personalities are humane or monstrous will depend on what ideas have been sown before the storm. If conservatives sow wisdom now, they may harvest virtue later.

And here lies the true meaning of ‘defending Europe’. It is not a matter of defending borders or institutions alone, but of defending truth against mere power — of ensuring that when the new order comes, it carries within it the memory of civilisation. The next Europe will not be chosen at the ballot box; it will be born in crisis, forged by necessity, legitimised by survival. Whether it is Hesperialist or barbaric will depend on who is ready when history calls. ▀

## “The paradox of our time is thus that Europe, the cradle of geopolitics, has ceased to think geopolitically.”

it ethically in order to avoid the worst. He must cultivate among future elites a sense of measure, justice, faith and duty — the virtues that distinguish authority from domination. If the right abdicates this moral formation, others will seize the Caesarian moment with less scruple. The populist demagogue, the technocratic despot, the digital oligarch — all are waiting. The challenge is to ensure that when the Republic of Procedures collapses, the men of conviction stand ready to build the Empire of Substance.

In this sense, the conservative task in the coming storm resembles that of parts of the senatorial elites during the fall of the Republic. They could not save the old structures which had utterly discredited themselves through populism and corruption, but they tried to preserve their soul and the memory of the past. Likewise, in the chaos that follows the crisis of woke globalist liberalism, those who still believe in order, family, and faith must become the custodians of continuity. Their institutions — schools, parishes, think tanks, local communities — will form the seeds of the post-liberal



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OTHER VOICES

# POPE BENEDICT XVI

## Speech at Representatives from World of Culture's Meeting

Paris, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2008

I thank you, Your Eminence, for your kind words. We are gathered in a historic place, built by the spiritual sons of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and which Your venerable predecessor, the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, desired to be a centre of dialogue between Christian Wisdom and the cultural, intellectual, and artistic currents of contemporary society. In particular, I greet the Minister of Culture, who is here representing the Government, together with Mr Giscard d'Estaing and Mr Jacques Chirac. I likewise greet all the Ministers present, the Representatives of UNESCO, the Mayor of Paris, and all other Authorities in attendance. I do not want to forget my colleagues from the French Institute, who are well aware of my regard for them. I thank the Prince of Broglie for his cordial words. We shall see each other again tomorrow morning. I thank the delegates

of the French Islamic community for having accepted the invitation to participate in this meeting: I convey to them my best wishes for the holy season of Ramadan already underway. Of course, I extend warm

**In order to understand to some degree the culture of the word, which developed deep within Western monasticism from the search for God, we need to touch at least briefly on the particular character of the book, or rather books, in which the monks encountered this word.**

greetings to the entire, multi-faceted world of culture, which you, dear guests, so worthily represent.

I would like to speak with you this evening about the origins of Western theology and the roots of European culture. I began by recalling that the place in which we are gathered is in a certain way emblematic. It is

in fact a place tied to monastic culture, insofar as young monks came to live here in order to learn to understand their vocation more deeply and to be more faithful to their mission. We are in a place that is associated with

the culture of monasticism. Does this still have something to say to us today, or are we merely encountering the world of the past? In order to answer this question, we must consider for a moment the nature of Western monasticism itself. What was it about? From the perspective of monasticism's historical influence, we could say that, amid the great

cultural upheaval resulting from migrations of peoples and the emerging new political configurations, the monasteries were the places where the treasures of ancient culture survived, and where at the same time a new culture slowly took shape out of the old. But how did it happen? What motivated men to come together to these places?

What did they want? How did they live?

First and foremost, it must be frankly admitted straight away that it was not their intention to create a culture nor even to preserve a culture from the past. Their motivation was much more basic. Their goal was: *quaerere Deum*. Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential – to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself. They were searching for God. They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is. It is sometimes said that they were ‘eschatologically’ oriented. But this is not to be understood in a temporal sense, as if they were looking ahead to the end of the world or to their own death, but in an existential sense: they were seeking the definitive behind the provisional. *Quaerere Deum*: because they were Christians, this

was not an expedition into a trackless wilderness, a search leading them into total darkness. God himself had provided signposts, indeed he had marked out a path which was theirs to find and to follow. This path was his word, which had been disclosed to men in the books of the sacred Scriptures. Thus, by inner necessity, the search for God demands a culture of the word or – as Jean Leclercq put it: eschatology and grammar are intimately connected with one another in Western monasticism (cf. *L’amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*). The longing for God, the *désir de Dieu*,

includes *amour des lettres*, love of the word, exploration of all its dimensions. Because in the biblical word God comes towards us and we towards him, we must learn to penetrate the secret of language, to understand it in its construction and in the manner of its expression. Thus it is through the search for God that the secular sciences take on their importance, sciences which show us the path towards language. Because the search for God required the culture of the word, it was appropriate that the monastery should have a library, pointing out pathways to the word. It was also appropriate

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to have a school, in which these pathways could be opened up. Benedict calls the monastery a *dominici servitii schola*. The monastery serves eruditio, the formation and education of man – a formation whose ultimate aim is that man should learn how to serve God. But it also includes the formation of reason – education – through which man learns to perceive, in the midst of words, the Word itself.

Yet in order to have a full vision of the culture of the word, which essentially pertains to the search for God, we must take a further step. The Word which opens the path of that search,

and is to be identified with this path, is a shared word. True, it pierces every individual to the heart (cf. Acts 2:37). Gregory the Great describes this as a sharp stabbing pain, which tears open our sleeping soul and awakens us, making us attentive to the essential reality, to God (cf. Leclercq, p. 35). But in the process, it also makes us attentive to one another. The word does not lead to a purely individual path of mystical immersion, but to the pilgrim fellowship of faith. And so this word must not only be pondered, but also correctly read. As in the rabbinic schools, so too with the monks, reading by the individual is at the same time a corporate activity. “But if *legere* and *lectio* are used without an explanatory note, then they designate for the most part an activity which, like singing and writing, engages the whole body and the whole spirit,” says Jean Leclercq on the subject (ibid., 21).

And once again, a further step is needed. We ourselves are brought into conversation with God by the word of God. The God who speaks in the Bible teaches us how to speak with him ourselves. Particularly in the book of Psalms, he gives us the words with which we can address him, with which we can bring our life, with all its high points and low points, into conversation with him, so that life itself thereby becomes a movement towards him. The psalms also contain frequent instructions about how they should be sung and accompanied by instruments. For prayer that issues from the word of God, speech is not enough: music is

required. Two chants from the Christian liturgy come from biblical texts in which they are placed on the lips of angels: the *Gloria*, which is sung by the angels at the birth of Jesus, and the *Sanctus*, which according to Isaiah 6 is the cry of the seraphim who stand directly before God. Christian worship is therefore an invitation to sing with the angels, and thus to lead the word to its highest destination. Once again, Jean Leclercq says on this subject: “The monks had

monks. What this expresses is the awareness that in communal prayer one is singing in the presence of the entire heavenly court, and is thereby measured according to the very highest standards: that one is praying and singing in such a way as to harmonise with the music of the noble spirits who were considered the originators of the harmony of the cosmos, the music of the spheres. From this perspective one can understand the seriousness of a remark

to designate his condition prior to conversion (cf. Confessions, VII, 10.16): man, who is created in God’s likeness, falls in his godforsakenness into the ‘zone of dissimilarity’ – into a remoteness from God, in which he no longer reflects him, and so has become dissimilar not only to God, but to himself, to what being human truly is. Bernard is certainly putting it strongly when he uses this phrase, which indicates man’s falling away from himself, to describe



to find melodies which translate into music the acceptance by redeemed man of the mysteries that he celebrates. The few surviving capitula from Cluny thus show the Christological symbols of the individual modes” (cf. ibid. p. 229).

For Benedict, the words of the Psalm: *coram angelis psallam Tibi, Domine* – in the presence of the angels, I will sing your praise (cf. 138:1) – are the decisive rule governing the prayer and chant of the

by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who used an expression from the Platonic tradition handed down by Augustine, to pass judgement on the poor singing of monks, which for him was evidently very far from being a mishap of only minor importance. He describes the confusion resulting from a poorly executed chant as a falling into the “zone of dissimilarity” – the *regio dissimilitudinis*. Augustine had borrowed this phrase from Platonic philosophy, in order

bad singing by monks. But it shows how seriously he viewed the matter. It shows that the culture of singing is also the culture of being, and that the monks have to pray and sing in a manner commensurate with the grandeur of the word handed down to them, with its claim on true beauty. This intrinsic requirement of speaking with God and singing of him with words he himself has given, is what gave rise to the great tradition of Western music. It was

not a form of private ‘creativity’, in which the individual leaves a memorial to himself and makes self-representation his essential criterion. Rather, it is about vigilantly recognising with the ‘ears of the heart’ the inner laws of the music of creation, the archetypes of music that the Creator built into his world and into men, and thus discovering music that is worthy of God, and at the same time truly worthy of man, music whose worthiness resounds in purity.

In order to understand to some degree the culture of the word, which developed deep within Western monasticism from the search for God, we need to touch at least briefly on the particular character of the book, or rather books, in which the monks encountered this word. The Bible, considered from a purely historical and literary perspective, is not simply a book, but a collection of literary texts which were redacted over the course of more than a thousand years, and in which the inner unity of the individual books is not immediately apparent. On the contrary, there are visible tensions between them. This is already the case within the Bible of Israel, which we Christians call the Old Testament. It is only rectified when we as Christians link the New Testament writings as, so to speak, a hermeneutical key with the Bible of Israel, and thus understand the latter as the journey towards Christ. With good reason, the New Testament generally designates the Bible not as “the Scripture” but as “the Scriptures”, which, when taken together, are naturally then regarded as the one word of God to us. But the use of this plural makes it quite clear that the word of God only



comes to us through the human word and through human words, that God only speaks to us through the humanity of human agents, through their words and their history. This means again that the divine element in the word and in the words is not self-evident. To say this in a modern way: the unity of the biblical books and the divine character of their words cannot be grasped by purely historical methods. The historical element is seen in the multiplicity and the humanity. From this perspective, one can understand the formulation of a medieval couplet that at first sight appears rather disconcerting: *littera gesta docet – quid credas allegoria ...* (cf. Augustine of Dacia, *Rotulus pugillariorum*, I). The letter indicates the facts; what you have to believe is indicated by allegory, that is to say, by Christological and pneumatological exegesis.

We may put it even more simply: Scripture requires exegesis, and it requires the context of the community in which it came to birth and in which it is lived. This is where its unity is to be found, and here too its unifying meaning is opened up. To put it yet another way: there are dimensions of meaning in the word and in words which only come to light within the living community of this history-generating word. Through the growing realisation of the different layers of meaning, the word is not devalued, but in fact appears in its full grandeur and dignity. Therefore, the Catechism of the Catholic Church can rightly say that Christianity does not simply represent a religion of the

book in the classical sense (cf. par. 108). It perceives in the words the Word, the Logos itself, which spreads its mystery through this multiplicity and the reality of human history. This particular structure of the Bible issues a constantly new challenge to every generation. It excludes by its nature everything that today is known as fundamentalism. In effect, the word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text. To attain to it involves a transcending and a process of understanding, led by the inner movement of the whole and

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hence it also has to become a process of living. Only within the dynamic unity of the whole are the many books one book. The Word of God and his action in the world are revealed only in the word and history of human beings.

The whole drama of this topic is illuminated in the writings of Saint Paul. What is meant by transcending the letter and understanding it solely from the perspective of the whole, he forcefully expressed as follows: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6). And he continues: “Where the Spirit is ... there is freedom (cf. 2 Cor 3:17). But one can only understand the greatness and

breadth of this vision of the biblical word if one listens closely to Paul with an open mind and then discovers that this liberating Spirit has a name, and hence that freedom has an inner criterion: “The Lord is the Spirit. Where the Spirit is ... there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). The liberating Spirit is not simply the exegete’s own idea, the exegete’s own vision. The Spirit is Christ, and Christ is the Lord who shows us the way. With the word of Spirit and of freedom, a further horizon opens up, but at the same time a clear limit is placed upon arbitrariness and subjectivity, which unequivocally binds both the individual and the community and brings about a new, higher obligation than that of the letter: namely, the obligation of insight and love. This tension between obligation and freedom, which extends far beyond the literary problem of scriptural exegesis, has also deter-

mined the thinking and acting of monasticism and has deeply marked Western culture. This tension presents itself anew as a challenge for our own generation as we face two poles: on the one hand, subjective arbitrariness, and on the other, fundamentalist fanaticism. It would be a disaster if today’s European culture could only conceive freedom as the absence of obligation, which would inevitably play into the hands of fanaticism and arbitrariness. The absence of obligation and arbitrariness do not signify freedom, but its destruction.

Thus far in our consideration of the ‘school of God’s service’, as Benedict describes monasticism, we have examined

only its orientation towards the word – towards the ‘ora’. Indeed, this is the starting point that sets the direction for the entire monastic life. But our consideration would remain incomplete if we did not also at least briefly glance at the second component of monasticism, indicated by the ‘labora’. In the Greek world, manual labour was considered something for slaves. Only the wise man, the one who is truly free, devotes himself to the things of the spirit; he views manual labour as somehow beneath him, and leaves it to people who are not suited to this higher existence in the world of the spirit. The Jewish tradition was quite different: all the great rabbis practised at the same time some form of handcraft. Paul, who as a Rabbi and then as a preacher of the Gospel to the Gentile world was also a tent-maker and earned his living with the work of his own hands, is no exception here, but stands within the common tradition of the rabbinite. Monasticism took up this tradition; manual work is a constitutive element of Christian monasticism. In his *Regula*, Saint Benedict does not speak specifically about schools, although in practice, he presupposes teaching and learning, as we have seen. However, in one chapter of his *Rule*, he does speak explicitly about work (cf. Chap. 48). And so does Augustine, who dedicated a book of his own to monastic work. Christians, who thus continued in the tradition previously established by Judaism, must have felt further vindicated by Jesus’s saying in Saint John’s Gospel, in defence of his activity on the Sabbath: “My Father is working still, and I am working” (5:17). The Greco-Roman world did not have a creator God; according to its vision, the highest

divinity could not, as it were, dirty his hands in the business of creating matter. The ‘making’ of the world was the work of the Demiurge, a lower deity. The Christian God is different: he, the one, real and only God, is also the Creator. God is working; he continues working in and on human history. In Christ, he enters personally into the laborious work of history. ‘My Father is working still, and I am working.’ God himself is the Creator of the world, and creation is not yet

## “What gave Europe’s culture its foundation – the search for God and the readiness to listen to him – remains today the basis of any genuine culture.

finished. God works, *ergázatai*! Thus human work was now seen as a special form of human resemblance to God, as a way in which man can and may share in God’s activity as creator of the world. Monasticism involves not only a culture of the word, but also a culture of work, without which the emergence of Europe, its ethos and its influence on the world would be unthinkable. Naturally, this ethos had to include the idea that human work and shaping of history is understood as sharing in the work of

the Creator, and must be evaluated in those terms. Where such evaluation is lacking, where man arrogates to himself the status of god-like creator, his shaping of the world can quickly turn into destruction of the world.

We set out from the premise that the basic attitude of monks in the face of the collapse of the old order and its certainties was *quaerere Deum* – setting out in search of God. We could describe this as the truly philosophical attitude: looking

beyond the penultimate, and setting out in search of the ultimate and the true. By becoming a monk, a man set out on a broad and noble path, but he had already found the direction he needed: the word of the Bible, in which he heard God himself speaking. Now he had to try to understand him, so as to be able to approach him. So the monastic journey is indeed a journey into the inner world of the received word, even if an infinite distance is involved. Within the monks’ seeking there is already

contained, in some respects, a finding. Therefore, if such seeking is to be possible at all, there has to be an initial spur, which not only arouses the will to seek, but also makes it possible to believe that the way is concealed within this word, or rather: that in this word, God himself has set out towards men, and hence men can come to God through it. To put it another way: there must be proclamation, which speaks to man and thus creates conviction, which in turn can become life. If a way is to be opened up into the heart of the biblical word as God’s word, this word must first of all be proclaimed outwardly. The classic formulation of the Christian faith’s intrinsic need to make itself communicable to others is a phrase from the First Letter of Peter, which in medieval theology was regarded as the biblical basis for the work of theologians: ‘Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason (the logos) for the hope that you all have’ (3:15). (The Logos, the reason for hope must become *apo-logía*; it must become a response). In fact, Christians of the nascent Church did not regard their missionary proclamation as propaganda, designed to enlarge their particular group, but as an inner necessity, consequent upon the nature of their faith: the God in whom they believed was the God of all people, the one, true God, who had revealed himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in his Son, thereby supplying the answer which was of concern to everyone and for which all people, in their innermost hearts, are waiting. The universality of God, and of reason open towards him, is what gave them the motivation—indeed, the obligation—to

proclaim the message. They saw their faith as belonging, not to cultural custom that differs from one people to another, but to the domain of truth, which concerns all people equally.

The fundamental structure of Christian proclamation ‘outwards’ – towards searching and questioning mankind – is seen in Saint Paul’s address at the Areopagus. We should remember that the Areopagus was not a form of academy at which the most illustrious minds would meet for discussion of lofty matters, but a court of justice, which was competent in matters of religion and ought to have opposed the import of foreign religions. This is exactly what Paul is reproached for: “he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18). To this, Paul responds: I have found an altar of yours with this inscription: ‘to an unknown god’. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you (17:23). Paul is not proclaiming unknown gods. He is proclaiming him whom men do not know and yet do know – the unknown-known; the one they are seeking, whom ultimately they know already, and who yet remains the unknown and unrecognisable. The deepest layer of human thinking and feeling somehow knows that he must exist, that at the beginning of all things, there must be not irrationality, but creative Reason – not blind chance, but freedom. Yet even though all men somehow know this, as Paul expressly says in the Letter to the Romans (1:21), this knowledge remains unreal: a God who is merely imagined and invented is not God at all. If he does not reveal himself, we cannot gain access to him. The novelty of Christian proclamation is that

it can now say to all peoples: he has revealed himself. He personally. And now the way to him is open. The novelty of Christian proclamation does not consist in a thought, but in a deed: God has revealed himself. Yet this is no blind deed, but one which is itself Logos – the presence of eternal reason in our flesh. *Verbum caro factum est* (Jn 1:14): just so, amid what is made (*factum*) there is now Logos, Logos is among us. Creation (*factum*) is rational. Naturally, the humility of reason is always needed, in order to accept it: man’s humility, which responds to God’s humility.

Our present situation differs in many respects from the one that Paul encountered in Athens, yet despite the difference, the two situations also have much in common. Our cities are no longer filled with altars and with images of multiple deities. God has truly become for many the great unknown. But just as in the past, when behind the many images of God the question concerning the unknown God was hidden and present, so too the present absence of God is silently besieged by the question concerning him. *Quaerere Deum* – to seek God and to let oneself be found by him, that is no less necessary today than in former times. A purely positivistic culture which tried to drive the question concerning God into the subjective realm, as being unscientific, would be the capitulation of reason, the renunciation of its highest possibilities, and hence a disaster for humanity, with very grave consequences. What gave Europe’s culture its foundation – the search for God and the readiness to listen to him – remains today the basis of any genuine culture. Thank you. ▀



# About Europe's soul

## VENTOTENE vs SUBIACO

Rod Dreher

**C**an Europe survive its current omnicrisis? Mass migration is the main cause, but in truth, that is only the most potent manifestation of the continent's loss of faith in itself and its own civilization. Earlier this year, J.D. Vance, the US vice president, scandalized Europe's leadership class with a landmark speech in Munich warning them that Europe's greatest threat comes not from Russia, but from its own inability to manage its own sad decline. The conference's German host literally wept publicly after the speech. The European ruling class fell into paroxysms of self-pity and outrage, wailing and gnashing their teeth over what they considered to be America's abandoning them. Many European conservatives, though, welcomed the address, grateful that a senior American leader recognized what they had been saying for years: that Europe must learn to take responsibility for its own affairs, and deal forthrightly with the cancers growing inside the European body politic.

As European resident who is also a personal friend of the vice president, I am often asked on my continental travels: *Does J.D. Vance hate Europe?* Of course he doesn't! In fact, Vance loves Europe, and has taken an even keener interest in it since his 2019 conversion to Catholicism. But his is a tough love, not the kind

of sentimental enabling of the beloved in her self-destructive ways. As part of his ongoing education about Europe and its challenges, the vice president recently hosted Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban and a small retinue, including me, in the library of his residence. Over drinks, Vance queried the Hungarian leader about Europe's condition. At one point, Orban, a Calvinist, repeated something he has said many times in his years as prime minister: that Europe will not recover until and unless it rediscovers its ancestral faith: Christianity.

This is a view I have held for many years; living full time in Europe since 2022 has only deepened that conviction. Alas, this is not a matter for politics alone. Orban has rightly said that politics cannot provide people with meaning. At its best, it can provide meaning-giving institutions – chief among them the churches – with the liberties and the resources to do their proper work. But if these institutions fail to act within the space opened for them by politics, then nothing that politicians do to address the meaning crisis will matter. “The problem,” I told the prime minister and the vice president, “is that few people in Europe go to church anymore. Not even in Hungary.” The prime minister sighed. He knows it is true. We all do. And we don't know what to do about it.

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Or don't we? Europe has been here before, when, after decades of decline, the Western Roman Empire whimpered to its conclusion in 476, when the last Western emperor capitulated to the barbarian strongman Odoacer in Ravenna. Four years later, in an Umbrian mountain village, a young man known to history as Benedict of Nursia was born to devout Christian parents. Around the year 500, Benedict's parents sent him down to Rome to complete his education. Before Rome's sack by Visigoths in 410, Rome had been home to one million souls. By the time Benedict arrived at its gates, only 100,000 Romans were left picking over the ruins. The pious young scholar from the provinces found the chaos and immorality of the once-great imperial city overwhelming. He judged that if he remained there, he might lose his faith. Eventually Benedict took refuge in a cliffside cave near Subiaco, a village 50 km east of Rome. For three years he dwelled in darkness there, in prayer and contemplation, fed by the charity of Romanus, a monk from a nearby monastery, who lowered food by rope to Benedict in a pail.

When Benedict emerged, he had a reputation for sanctity, and was invited by a monastic community to be their abbot. By the time he died in the year 547, Benedict had founded twelve monasteries, and written his famous Rule, which would in time become the "source code," so to speak, for a vast constellation of monasteries and convents that would appear throughout western Europe in the centuries to come. The Rule is a short, simple guide to living in Christian community – what Benedict called "a school for the Lord's service." It is not a mystical tract or a deep theological pamphlet. Rather, the Rule is a practical guide for how to dwell together in prayer, simplicity, and disciplined community. Benedict did not set out to Make Rome Great Again, or in any way to recover the political strength of the lost empire. The guiding star of the Rule was the search for God; it was, in a sense, a map for pilgrims.

Benedictine monasticism arose in a time and place in great crisis. The fall of the Empire was a total catastrophe for western Europe. Though poor and beset by untold challenges, the Church was the only effective government in most places. Their quest for God led the early Benedictines to build monastic communities in rural places, where they provided much-needed help and hope to the peasantry. Tens of thousands of young men and women flocked to the Benedictines, taking up residence behind monastery walls. Though semi-cloistered, the Benedictines maintained active relationships with the laity. They taught them the Gospel, and showed them how to. Pray. But the monks also taught them how to grow and build things, using knowledge that had been lost to most people in the Empire's fall. And, within the libraries of those fortresses of faith, the monks preserved holy books,

both sacred and profane. The monasteries became like arks floating atop the turbulent sea of early medieval Europe. They prepared Europe for the birth of a new, Christian civilization. This is why some scholars consider the Rule second only to the Bible as the most influential text of European history.

When he retreated to Subiaco, Benedict planted himself in the stony cliff like a mustard seed. He produced, by writing and example, a method of seeking and serving God in a community of faith constructed to withstand a world of chaos and decadence. This is the kind of creative faith the West desperately needs today, more than it has in fifteen centuries. Why? Because today, we are like Rome on the verge of civilizational collapse.

This is not the diagnosis of a mad prophet living in the Black Forest, eating locusts and honey. This is the diagnosis of two recent popes. In a 1999 address to the synod of European bishops, Pope St. John Paul II said, "Europe today risks following the path of the ancient Roman Empire, which collapsed not only because of external invasions, but above all because of internal decay, moral corruption, and the loss of faith in its own values." In 2003, the ailing pontiff repeated the warning: "Like the Roman Empire in its final phase, Europe seems to be sliding toward a form of cultural suicide if it does not rediscover its Christian soul." Shortly after succeeding John Paul as pope, Benedict XVI addressed the World Youth Day gathering in Cologne, telling the crowd, "Just as the Roman Empire fell, so too the great cultural structures of the West are in danger of collapsing if they lose their moral and spiritual foundations." And again, in a 2007 address to Europe's bishops, Benedict XVI said, "Europe today is like the Roman Empire at the time of its decline: it is losing its identity, its vitality, and its future."

What did the two popes see that led them to that apocalyptic conclusion?

**Demographic decline:** the refusal of native European populations to have children at replacement rates indicated a loss of faith in the future, or perhaps an individualistic choice to exchange the prospect of starting families for the promise of a richer and freer material life.

**Mass migration:** In late imperial Rome, fertility decline contributed to the inability of the state to control its borders. Plus, the state needed manpower, which the more fertile barbarian tribes provided. Though barbarian tribes were later Christianized, their initial migration into what was once Roman territory became both necessary and inevitable. Similarly, mass internal migration of Roman peasants from the countryside into cities fractured family ties and spread individualism.

**Spiritual and moral collapse:** Though the late Roman Empire was officially Christian, the faith had

not penetrated deeply enough in the West in time to revitalize a demoralized population. The Roman family form disintegrated from the spread of individualism, including easy divorce, and Romans lost their *pietas*, the virtue of respect for the gods, family, authority, and the past. Harvard sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman wrote: "*The Roman family system, which had been the backbone of the state, disintegrated... The final result was a low birth rate, a high death rate, and a population which could not reproduce itself. The empire fell because it had no families to hold it together.*" (Zimmerman, 'Family And Civilization,' (1947, p. 308)

John Paul and Benedict identified all these factors in contemporary Europe. Today, demographers throughout the West note that the only people who defy the widespread collapse in fertility are highly committed religious traditionalists, such as Orthodox Jews and Anabaptist sects in North America. Most Christians, though, are going along with the crowd, over the demographic cliff.

## “What did the two popes see that led them to that apocalyptic conclusion? Demographic decline, Mass migration, Spiritual and moral collapse...

The crisis is at its worst in Europe, but is general throughout the West, including in my native country, the United States. In 2017, I published a bestselling book titled *The Benedict Option*, in which I too compared the situation in the West today to fifth-century Rome, and encouraged Christian readers to look to the example of St. Benedict and his followers as a way forward through this seemingly terminal crisis. In the book, I quoted lines from Father Joseph Ratzinger in 1969, in which the future Benedict XVI predicted a coming collapse in the Catholic Church's power, authority, and numbers. He prophesied that the Church would be reduced to a relatively small number of the truly devout, but these small groups would prepare the ground for rebirth.

My book endorsed Ratzinger's bleak but hopeful vision, and his subsequent call for Christians to be "creative minorities" in a post-Christian society. If the laity – Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox – can

find ways to adapt the general Benedictine model of disciplined communal living to their particular circumstances, we stand a good chance not only of surviving the long civilizational winter, but emerging to re-evangelize a world in need of the Gospel. *The Benedict Option* sold well in the United States, and was eventually translated into ten languages. In 2018, at a media event in Rome, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, then the private secretary to the Pope Emeritus, delivered a speech praising the book saying it is not only "a strategy for Christians in a post-Christian society; it is a call to live the faith with courage and joy, even in the midst of the storm." Vatican journalists told me this is as close as I could get to an endorsement from the great Benedict XVI himself.

What are the political implications of all this for Europe today? Are there lessons we can draw from the Benedict Option that apply beyond the call for creative lay minorities to found communities of faith? I believe there are, but it will require European political

leaders to reconsider radically the entire model of its postwar development.

In 1941, Nazi armies overrunning Europe and the victory of fascism seemingly fated, two left-wing Italian intellectuals, Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, with additional help by Eugenio Colorni, penned a document that came to be known as *The Ventotene Manifesto*. Written in secret while Spinelli and Rossi were imprisoned on the Italian island of Ventotene, the manifesto has been called the Magna Carta of European federalism. Its authors saw nationalism as the root cause of totalitarianism and the world war. Nation-states and their imperialism started the war; only "the abolition of the division of Europe into national, sovereign states" could guarantee peace after the war ends. They proposed a European federation, governed by a transnational authority, sharing a common currency, and defended by a unified army. Under the Ventotene plan, each nation-state would "retain

the autonomy it needs for a plastic articulation and development of a political life according to the particular characteristics of the people.” But the greater power would be held by “a solid international State” that would implement socialist reforms.

In 1944, Spinelli founded the European Federalist Movement. The Ventotene Manifesto informed the 1950 Schuman Declaration, named after Robert Schuman, the foreign minister of France. The core idea was to lay the foundation for permanent peace by abolishing the historic enmity between France and Germany. With the approval of West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the Schuman Declaration mandated the integration of the coal and steel industries of the two nations, as the core of a future economic federation of European states.

This was to be the first step towards what Schuman hoped would “lead to the realization of the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace.” One

year later, in 1951, six countries – France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg – signed the Treaty of Paris, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). In 1957, the Treaty of Rome created the European Economic Community (EEC), and in 1973, the EEC accepted three more members: Great Britain, Ireland, and Denmark. The 1980s

brought more members – Greece, Spain, and Portugal – and deepening integration. After the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall, pressure built to accelerate the federalist plan. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 formally created the European Union (EU). Three years later, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined, and the Schengen agreement, effectively abolishing internal borders, went into effect. In 2002, twelve EU countries adopted a common currency, the euro. Within five years, a dozen more nations, including a number of former Soviet bloc countries, had joined the EU, though not all accepted the currency union.

A major stumbling block came in 2003, with the failure of the draft European Constitution. The constitution required unanimous support from voters in member states, but when French and Dutch voters rejected it, the constitution was effectively dead. Majorities in both countries hesitated over fears that the document would take away too much sovereignty (Netherlands), and impose a neoliberal Anglo-Saxon economic model (France). Voters also expressed concern that the constitution was the product of a

transnational elite out of touch with the people.

Yet Catholic leaders, including Pope John Paul II, voiced serious concern about the constitution during the drafting period. The document elided over 1,500 years of Europe’s Christian history, as if the continent had gone from antiquity to modernity with no intervening religious period – over a thousand years in which what was once called “Christendom” emerged, and built Europe. As Catholic Rocco Buttiglione later observed, “How strange was that? All values could be mentioned: the Greek and Roman heritage, the Enlightenment, but not Christianity. But without the Bible, the Enlightenment would not have been there.” Prominent Catholics sounded the alarm about the fundamentalist secularism of the document. “The Constitution’s silence on God is a betrayal of Europe’s soul,” thundered then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. For his part, Italian Cardinal Camillo Ruini declared, “A Europe without God will become a Europe against man.”

**Consider the factor at the heart of the religious analysis: the faith. According to surveys, Christian affiliation across the EU – that is, the number of Europeans identifying as Christian – has declined from around 75 percent to 64 percent.**

The fullest statement of the cost of leaving out the Christian keystone in constructing the arch of the new Europe came from John Paul II, in his lengthy 2003 exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa* (The Church in Europe). In it, the Polish pontiff decried “the loss of Europe’s Christian memory and heritage, accompanied by a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference

whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without spiritual roots and somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history. It is no real surprise, then, that there are efforts to create a vision of Europe which ignore its religious heritage, and in particular, its profound Christian soul, asserting the rights of the peoples who make up Europe without grafting those rights on to the trunk which is enlivened by the sap of Christianity.”

John Paul said Europe was turning into a mere museum of Christian symbols, among which dwelled a lost and confused people marked by “fear of the future.” He saw the diminishing rates of marriage and births, broken families, and the dwindling number of vocations to clerical life, as signs of “existential fragmentation” and the growing triumph of a “culture of death.” Europe at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, said the pope, was engaged in “an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ.” Look no further, he said, than the refusal of the European Constitution drafters to include reference to Christianity in the document. A union of European

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nations based only on geography and economy, and leaving out moral virtue, will lack substance.

The great pontiff, then entering his final physical decline, begged the peoples of Europe to remember their Christian *pietas*. In these anguished words, we hear the voice of a saint who saw off a totalitarian atheist regime, only to witness, in his final years, the coming of a liberal democratic version: “*Taking up anew this invitation to hope, I repeat to you again today: Europe, as you stand at the beginning of the third millennium, “Open the doors to Christ! Be yourself. Rediscover your origins. Relive your roots”.* Down the centuries you have received the treasure of Christian faith. It has grounded your life as a society on principles drawn from the Gospel, and traces of this are evident in the art, literature, thought and culture of your nations. But this heritage does not belong just to the past; it is a project in the making, to be passed on to future generations, for it has indelibly marked the life of the individuals and peoples who together have forged the continent of Europe.”

Two years later, John Paul II descended to the grave. Two years later, in 2007, the Treaty of Lisbon, the successor document to the failed European Constitution, was signed in that city’s Jeronimos Monastery. It went into effect in 2009. The treaty was scarcely different than the Constitution it replaced. In its pages, God was still dead.

Since 2009, Europe – still relatively prosperous, still relatively free – has continued its death rattle.

Consider the factor at the heart of the religious analysis: the faith. According to surveys, Christian affiliation across the EU – that is, the number of Europeans identifying as Christian – has declined from around 75 percent to 64 percent. France and Great Britain both lost their Christian majorities after 2009. The more important figure – the number of Christians who go to church – has accelerated. Across the EU, only 18 percent of Christians report attending services weekly or monthly. If it weren’t for the relatively high number of churchgoers in Italy and Poland, the EU number would be much lower. Thousands of churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are closing or merging.

The overall birth rate continues to plummet, now at 1.46 – far below the replacement rate of 2.1 births per female. Italy (1.24) and Spain (1.16), in particular, become fertility deserts. No country – not even Hungary, with its unusually generous tax and welfare benefits offered to large families – has figured out how to reverse the decline. European economies have stagnated. Growth is virtually non-existent, with stifling regulations quashing innovation. Of the world’s top 25 most valuable companies by market capitalization, Danish drug manufacture Novo Nordisk (No. 25) is the only European country on the list. Some countries – France in particular – are struggling with



high levels of debt and political paralysis that makes economic reform difficult. And Europe cannot defend itself. The panic that J.D. Vance's Munich speech set off had much to do with the fact that Europe's NATO countries had long depended on the presence of the US Armed Forces, allowing them to reduce defense spending and pour money into social welfare programs. European militaries lack material and military readiness.

What's more, most Europeans surveyed don't think they live in countries worth fighting for. Polls show that most Europeans say they would refuse to a poll earlier. A 2024 Gallup poll found only 33 percent of Europeans saying they would fight if their country were invaded (the numbers are higher for European nations geographically closer to Russia). A separate poll of Germans in the summer of 2025 found that 44 percent of those surveyed said they definitely would not defend Germany if it were invaded, with an additional 13 percent saying they "probably" would not. As the Austrian commentator Ralph Schöllhammer quipped, "Germans don't even want to defend their own country, but you think they will fight for [Ukraine]?" He added, "As it turns out, postmodern-secular-hyper rationalism is a lot of fun in peace times, but leaves you utterly defenseless during times of conflict. The future belongs to those willing to fight for it."

Cultural malaise is general throughout Europe. Without belief in God and a transcendent meaning to life, people have no motivation to live sacrificially to perpetuate their social order. Europeans began by ceasing to believe in God, and are ending by ceasing to believe in Europe.

Which brings us to the most pressing issue facing the continent today: mass migration, especially from Islamic countries. Defense experts like Britain's David Betz and France's Thibault de Montbrial warn that the countries of western Europe is nearing the brink of

civil wars. Mass migration, which governing authorities have been unable or unwilling to stop, is pushing native populations to the brink of revolt. Crime rates, driven by migrants, are skyrocketing. Housing shortages are growing worse because of all the newcomers. Political and religious violence caused by Islamic extremists tests the tolerance of Europeans, whose governments often respond by cracking down not on migrants, but on those who complain about them.

And yet, the European Union carries on with plans to force member nations like Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia, which have all rejected requests to receive western Europe's migrant overflow, to do Brussels' bidding. As of this writing, the EU is threatening to impose fines on member countries that resist. Since June 13, 2024, Hungary has been paying a fine of €1 million per day imposed by the European Court of Justice for the Magyar nation's refusal to admit so-called asylum seekers.

In sum, the postwar dreams of a united, federalist Europe governed by a superstate headquartered in Brussels are in trouble. For all that, clear majorities in Europe support the European Union project, and show relatively high levels of trust in the EU. A Spring 2025 Eurobarometer survey across all 27 member states found that an average of 74 percent of EU citizens believe their country benefits overall from EU membership, while 52 percent expressed trust in the EU – an 18-year high. How to explain the EU's positive numbers amid a growing sense of crisis and fear of decline in individual countries? It is likely that Europeans feel threatened by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and, despite the alliance's feeble defense capabilities absent American support, feel psychologically comforted by the sense of continental unity the EU provides. It is also the case that despite Europe's chronic economic woes, most Europeans believe that EU membership gives them greater financial security.

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There is a better way – a way that satisfies Europeans' desire for a more unified, cooperative civilizational bloc, while jettisoning the overbearing ideologies that Eurocrats in Brussels impose on unwilling peoples of the diverse continent. In 2024, on the Feast of St. Benedict, European parliamentarians of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) bloc gathered in Subiaco to sign a Charter Of Values. The goal is not to abolish the European Union, but to reform it to make it better serve member states and their vital interests.

The Ventotene Manifesto prescribed a federalist, secular Europe in which national distinctions were

suppressed in the service of unity, socialism, and globalism – which Europe has more or less achieved. But it has made Europe weaker in fundamental ways that are becoming harder to deny, especially now that the United States has made clear that Europe has to stand on its own feet in terms of self-defense. Once again, despite telling pollsters how much they believe in the EU, the unwillingness of most Europeans to fight for their countries, or even to make babies for their countries, is a more honest measure of Europe's civic health. By contrast, the Subiaco Charter calls for a return to Christianity, tradition, the natural family, and meaningful respect for national sovereignty within a broader framework of unity. As the Charter. Says: "We

*do not accept the fake choice between more Europe and no Europe. Instead we believe that, while valuing cooperation among European nations, limiting any undue interference is essential for maintaining the unique cultural and historical identities of our Member States and guaranteeing national sovereignty."*

The Charter recognizes that each European nation developed under different conditions, and has a right to its own values, as opposed to having the godless progressivism favored by the Eurocrat class forced on them from faraway Brussels: "*We advocate for a society that embrace diversity of thought. We firmly oppose an EU intended as a tool for the realisation of a globalist agenda aiming to impose progressive single thinking and ethical relativism. Instead, we encourage open dialogue and respectful exchange of ideas, recognising the richness that comes from a variety of perspectives.*" In other words, let Spain be Spain, and let Hungary be Hungary.

For example, Spain has long been one of the world's most progressive countries on LGBT laws, in conformity with the militant universalist liberalism of the EU ruling caste. By contrast, Hungary under Viktor Orban's leadership is a bone in the EU's throat. In 2021, Orban's Fidesz Party passed a law banning LGBT "propaganda" aimed at minors and schoolchildren. Fidesz said Brussels' sexually permissive pedagogy violates the values of the culturally conservative nation. Enraged EU leaders condemned Hungary, with Mark Rutte, then the prime minister of the Netherlands, saying Hungary should be expelled from the EU over the matter. A generation ago, Orban's conservative views – e.g., don't force Drag Queen Story Hour on little children – would have been closer to the European norm than Rutte's. The fact that Rutte, who is now the NATO secretary-general, would have a thousand-year-old European nation that was for centuries a bulwark against Islamic invasion thrown out of the EU over teaching gender ideology to kids is a sign of profound decadence.

Be that as it may, the Subiaco Charter does not attempt to impose Christian virtue on any member state. It simply asks for tolerating cultural diversity. While this might sound weak to more robust individual Christians, this approach has the virtue of being realistic about the fragile state of the Christian faith on the continent where it was first developed. After all, the faith cannot be revived from the top down. Consider the case of Viktor Orban's Hungary. The Magyar leader and his party wrote Christianity

into the country's post-communist constitution, the Fundamental Law, as the basis for the nation's laws. The Fundamental Law does not make Hungary a confessional state – the population is divided between a Catholic majority, with significant minorities of Protestants and unbelievers. Rather, the constitution recognizes Christianity as the historical foundation for the nation's identity and the source of its morality.

This reasonable approach has, in practice, opened a space for churches and religious organization to thrive. And yet, they have not done so. A Catholic sociologist at a Hungarian university lamented to me that the only vibrant religious communities in

the country are the tiny Orthodox Jewish sects, and a large non-denominational Protestant megachurch with satellite campuses. Churchgoing rates remain low among both Catholics and Protestants. Alas, this is not a problem that politicians are in a position to fix.

It is worth noting that Orban recognizes that cultural strength depends both on the protection of churches and distinct nations – a

strategy that directly opposes the goals and methods of the secular Ventotene-style model that has dominated Europe in the postwar period. It dovetails perfectly with the Subiaco Charter's call for maintaining the unique cultural and historical identities of our Member States and guaranteeing national sovereignty." And it is consonant with the words of ECR Co-President Nicola Procaccini, upon the declaration of the Subiaco Charter in 2024. Said Procaccini, "We conservatives want to protect the classical values and the Judeo-Christian roots that are decisive for the formation of the EU to come. Forgetting the past, as the mainstream 'cancel culture' would have it, means jeopardizing the future."

It is here that the Benedictine model can guide us in another way. Though the early Benedictines depended on the patronage of Pope St. Gregory the Great, who favored the Rule over competing forms of monasticism, the Benedictines' true success came with their slow, organic growth over time. As St. John Henry Newman wrote in his essay "The Mission of St. Benedict" (1858):

*When the bodily frame receives an injury, or is seized with some sudden malady, nature may be expected to set right the evil, if left to itself, but she requires time; science comes to shorten the process, and is violent that it may be certain. This may be taken to illustrate St. Benedict's mode of counteracting the miseries of life. He found the world,*

**"We conservatives want to protect the classical values and the Judeo-Christian roots that are decisive for the formation of the EU to come. Forgetting the past, as the mainstream 'cancel culture' would have it, means jeopardizing the future." - Nicola Procaccini**

physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it in the way, not of science, but of nature, not as if setting about to do it, nor professing to do it, by any set time or by any rare specific or by any series of strokes, but so quietly, patiently, gradually, that often, till the work was done, it was not known to be doing. It was a restoration rather than a visitation, correction, or conversion. The new world which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing, and building; and other silent men, men not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, trying their eyes, and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully deciphered and copied and re-copied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one that “contended or cried out,” or drew attention to what was going on; but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning, and a city. Roads and bridges connected it with other abbeys and cities, which had similarly grown up; and what the haughty Alaric or fierce Attila had broken to pieces, these patient meditative men had brought together and made to live again.

According to Newman, declared at his 2019 canonization to be a “Doctor of the Church,” the special gift of the Benedictines was “poetical perception,” as distinct from an analytical, systematic, scientific stance toward the world.

It demands, as its primary condition, that we should not put ourselves above the objects. In which it resides, but at their

feet; that we should feel them to be above and beyond us, that we should look up to them, and that, instead of fancying that we can comprehend them, we should take for granted that we are surrounded and comprehended by them ourselves. It implies that we understand. Them to be vast, immeasurable, impenetrable, inscrutable, mysterious; so that at bet we are only forming conjectures about them, not conclusions, for the phenomena which they present admit of many explanations, and we cannot know the true one. Poetry does not address the reason, but the imagination and affections; it leads to admiration, enthusiasm, devotion, love. The vague, the uncertain, the irregular, the sudden, are among its attributes or sources. Hence it is that a child’s mind is so full of poetry, because he knows so little; and. An old man of the world so devoid of poetry, because his experience of facts is so wide.

Newman’s approach finds contemporary resonance in the work of the British psychiatrist and cultural theorist Iain McGilchrist, who locates the source of the modern world’s malaise and brokenness in the early modern preferential option for the analytic over

the poetic. In McGilchrist’s analysis, the propulsive urge to understand the world through empirical study – the function of the brain’s left hemisphere – gave Western man unusual power over the material world, but at the cost of losing a deeper sense of its meaning. He advocates a balancing return to art, poetry, liturgy, and other aesthetic approaches to contemplating the divinely-given mysteries of Creation. These two ways of knowing must not be opposed, but should work symphonically to produce a more accurate and fruitful – and dare I say, sacramental – way of participating in the life of the world.

Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI, who took his papal name in homage to the saint of Nursia, one of the patrons of Europe, frequently spoke of the theophanic and evangelical qualities of beauty. In a 2010 interview with his biographer Peter Seewald, Benedict observed: “The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments: the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb. Better witness is borne by the splendor of holiness and art than by clever excuses apologists have spun.”

The example of the saints can be understood as a form of moral beauty. In both cases – moral and aesthetic beauty – the reality of God can be directly perceived. Pope Benedict called this the “via pulchritudinis,” or way of beauty, saying that it “opens the human spirit to the sense of the eternal.”

In June 2025, I saw a 20,000-strong multitude of

young Catholics – mostly French, but also some from other European nations – undertake the *via pulchritudinis* on a three-day walking pilgrimage from Paris to Chartres. This was the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual Pentecost weekend pilgrimage taken by young Catholics devoted to the traditional Latin mass. Their walk began with mass at the church of St. Sulpice in central Paris, and ended on Pentecost Monday at the great medieval cathedral rising on the plains of Beauce, some 60 km from the French capital.

Interviewing the pilgrims (average age: 19) at the start of their walk, what struck me was their sense of joy. They seemed serenely aware of their lonely condition as believers living in a society that had lost its faith, and therefore its way. They saw themselves as on a holy quest, the *quaerere Deum* (“to seek God”) that is the spiritual core of the Benedictine life. If I could sum up the collective message I received from them in those interviews and conversion, it would go like this: *We were given nothing by our parents. We are looking for God, for transcendence, for purpose, for stability, and*

**The difference between a tourist and a pilgrim is that the tourist sees all these beautiful things, but doesn’t see them as pointing towards God. A pilgrim experiences the same beautiful things, but recognizes them as pointing to God.**

for community. These young people are the offspring of the great deculturation imposed on them by their forebears who built postwar Europe. They were taught that God is dead, or at least marginal to the reality of life. They were taught that science is the only reliable source of meaning, and that they are free (or, one might say, condemned) to create individual purpose from their own unfettered choices. And they were formed to think that loving their nation and the cultures of their particular nations was a fault that led to chauvinism, and perhaps even to violence.

At the start of the pilgrimage, I spoke to a young man from Canada, Matthew Witzane, who said we may be at the beginning of a Christian renewal. He sees small Catholic communities emerging everywhere in North America. I told him that I am aware of the same thing happening in France and Italy. Witzane said that he had come to the Chartres pilgrimage because he wanted to experience Europe “not as a tourist, but as a pilgrim.” “The difference between a tourist and a pilgrim is that the tourist sees all these beautiful things, but doesn’t see them as

pointing towards God,” he said. “A pilgrim experiences the same beautiful things, but recognizes them as pointing to God.” Three days later, I sat in the crowded nave of the Chartres cathedral, watching a seemingly endless parade of youth, with beaming faces, process in, carrying flags of their nations and

regions, and banners proclaiming devotion to local saints. *This is Christendom*, I thought.

After the mass, I saw a young Belgian man sitting with his friends on the cathedral’s lawn, drinking a beer with his sneakers at his side. Sunburned, exhausted, but visibly happy, Alexandre Gaubert, 22, told me, “Christ gave us the power to come here. My feet are in pain, but my heart feels good.” Something is happening with the Catholic youth of France – and it’s happening without the involvement of the bishops (France’s episcopate takes a dim view of the enthusiasm for the traditional Latin rite). Maria-Katrina Cortez, a researcher on French religion and politics at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics in Paris, said that while religious faith and practice continues to decline overall in the country, French adults under the age of 34 believe in and practice their faith at nearly double the rate of the older generations. While fewer young French call themselves Catholic, the ones who do are serious about it. Said Cortez: “This isn’t a mass revival, numerically speaking. It is a qualitative rather than quantitative resurgence.”

Very well. The Benedictine movement of the early medieval period started small, but flourished because of its discipline, and because those monks and nuns offered to the lost and harried peasants of Dark Ages Europe a better way of life. Who knows where this organic movement arising from the laity will lead? Those searching Catholic youth know all too well that the godless, globalist, post-national society and culture bequeathed to them by their parents and grandparents leads nowhere. They are looking to Europe’s deep past for a path out of modernity’s dark wood.

Thanks to the long Christian heritage disdained by the technocrats of Brussels, Europe has inherited material gifts that too many Europeans fail to see, but which are vividly and delightfully clear to North Americans.

Standing outside of St. Sulpice at the start of the pilgrimage, an American priest leading a group of Catholic high school boys spoke of having spent the previous week with them at the traditionalist monastery of Fontgombault. The boys had been dazzled by the beauty and the spiritual depth of traditional Benedictine monasticism. They had never seen anything like it.





“When they come here, one of the things they experience is that a joyful Catholic life is possible,” the priest told me. “In the United States, people feel very isolated from that, because we don’t have the cultural heritage that points us in that direction. So, when the boys experience that, they realize it’s not just a storybook fantasy.” “You have to know where you’re coming from, where you’re going to, and what you’re bringing with you, to have any sort of successful life or journey,” he went on. “Things like the Chartres pilgrimage are giving people a sense of reorientation, which they carry into the world.”

I left Chartres convinced that if Europe is to be saved from its omnicrisis, that salvation won’t come through its political leadership, nor from its ecclesial hierarchy, which, in the Catholic case, seems more determined to advocate for open borders bringing ever more Muslims into de-Christianized Europe than dedicated to fostering things like the Chartres pilgrimage.

**The future of Europe will not be decided in Brussels or Rome, but rather in the forgotten places of the Ventotene Empire, in the Subiacos where, what the haughty Eurocrats and godless globalists have broken to pieces, these patient meditative young men and women will bring together, and make to live again.**

than the world into which St. Benedict was born, and began his world-changing mission. But that material abundance and social order is a mask that conceals deep corruption. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said: *“The strength or weakness of a society depends more on the level of its spiritual life than on its level of industrialization. Neither a market economy nor even general abundance constitutes the crowning achievement of human life. If a nation’s spiritual energies have been exhausted, it will not be saved from collapse by the most perfect government structure or by any industrial development. A tree with a rotten core cannot stand.”*

That salvation will come through young men and women like these pilgrims, who celebrated in fellowship their common faith, but also, through banners and hymns in their own languages, their particular nations, which emerged from the Gospel being received and developed according to the ways of their people.

True, Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is incomparably richer and more peaceful

True, politics alone cannot renew a decadent society. But politics can clear a space for renewal movements, both spiritual and cultural, and defend them from the cultured barbarians who seem them as threats to the post-national, post-Christian dystopia they have created, but insist on calling paradise. This is the historical lesson of Subiaco, and the promise of the Subiaco Charter. The early medieval church hierarchy could not have commanded the green shoot of a St. Benedict to arise from the rocks of his cave hermitage. But rise he did, thanks to divine providence. Let’s not forget, though, that if his early followers had not had as a patron the most powerful politician in the early medieval church, Pope St. Gregory the Great, the monastic order that helped create Europe might never have taken off.

Gregory, whose reign began in 590, more than half a century after Benedict’s death, wrote the only biography we have of the saint. So taken was the pope by the Benedictine model that he protected the monks from episcopal interference, encouraged their missionary work, and promoted them in hundreds of letters to barbarian rulers. In a sense, St. Benedict needed St. Gregory the Great.

In our time, would-be spiritual reformers like the Chartres pilgrims, and leaders of nascent lay Christian communities, like the vibrant Tipi Loschi of San Benedetto del Tronto, in Italy, not only need

protection and encouragement within the government of the Church, but also patronage and defense by secular lawmakers. Yet the initiative to take the first steps on Europe’s grand pilgrimage of civilizational restoration must come from within the hearts of believers themselves – the “creative minorities” foreseen by Benedict XVI.

Though modern Europe has become a spiritual desert, the Lord has nevertheless scattered seeds here. We must all become pilgrims, yes -- but also careful gardeners. The future of Europe will not be decided in Brussels or Rome, but rather in the forgotten places of the Ventotene Empire, in the Subiacos where, what the haughty Eurocrats and godless globalists have broken to pieces, these patient meditative young men and women will bring together, and make to live again. ▀



**Rod Dreher**

American conservative writer, author, and editor. He is the author of several books, including ‘The Benedict Option’.



# The Politics of Home

## FAITH, FAMILY, FLAG, FREEDOM

James Orr

**M**odern political thought can trace its origins to a founding act of violence: the severing of earthly authority from any transcendent foundation. When the social contract theorists - Hobbes fleeing civil war, Locke justifying revolution, Rousseau fantasising utopia - reconceived political legitimacy as grounded in human agreement rather than divine prescription, they believed they were liberating humanity from superstition. What they actually accomplished was a form of metaphysical patricide: the destruction of the only grounds on which political authority can be distinguished from organised coercion.

The consequences for modernity are now inescapable. We inherit institutions - constitutional government, the rule of law, limited sovereignty, human dignity, the inviolability of conscience - that were forged over centuries within a synthesis of the Hebraic (biblical faith) and the Hellenic (classical reason), the twin engines of European civilisational achievement. Yet we have systematically dismantled the metaphysical foundations that made these institutions intelligible. We have cut off the fruits from the roots and keep the ethical superstructure whilst denying the theological infrastructure that alone renders it coherent. As the nineteenth-century Spanish reactionary Juan Donoso Cortés diagnosed with prophetic

clarity, liberalism represents the transitional phase when society lives off the moral capital of Christian civilisation whilst no longer believing Christian dogma. That capital is nearly exhausted. The choice before us is not between progress and reaction, but between two fundamentally incompatible visions of human existence. At the heart of conservative political philosophy stands what might be called a quaternary of order: faith, family, flag, and freedom. These are not four separate principles to be defended independently but a

unified architectonic structure, each element supporting and requiring the others in necessary sequence.

*Faith* represents the vertical axis, the grounding of all earthly authority in transcendent truth. Insofar as it is a pre-political posture, faith ensures that sovereignty is always limited, always answerable to a justice it did not create and cannot alter. Without this

**We inherit obligations to ancestors whose struggles and sacrifices made our existence possible; we bear duties to descendants whose world we are shaping by our choices; we are stewards, not owners, of an estate that must be passed on improved to posterity.**

dimension, political authority teeters permanently at the edge of organised violence. *Family* represents the generative foundation, the primordial cell from which all political order grows, the school of virtue, the mechanism of cultural transmission across generations. More crucially, it is the first and most important school of freedom, where children learn obedience to legitimate authority, respect for others, and subordination of immediate desire to long-term good, capacities without which self-government is impossible.

# “At the heart of conservative political philosophy stands what might be called a quaternary of order: faith, family, flag, and freedom.”

*Flag* represents the horizontal-temporal axis, the particular national community extended through time, binding the dead, the living, and the yet unborn. The nation is not an arbitrary social construct but the organically emerging necessary condition for genuine political community.

Finally, *freedom* represents the organising horizon towards which the other three dimensions oriented. Liberalism does not grasp what conservatism does, namely that the only freedom worth having is the freedom not to whatever one wants but rather the freedom to do what one ought to do. That means that freedom - properly understood - must be ranked beneath the first three foundational goods; only then can society achieve the most propitious conditions for what Burke called ‘ordered freedom.’ Yet contemporary discourse defines freedom negatively, as absence of constraint: I am free to the extent that nothing prevents me from doing whatever I want. This is the freedom of the unencumbered self, the autonomous individual who stands prior to all social bonds. It is the freedom promised by Rousseau’s *Contrat Social*, by Mill’s *On Liberty*, by Rawls’s theory of justice, the freedom that is wired into the fabric of liberal political theory.

But this negative freedom is not freedom at all. It is slavery: slavery to appetite, to passion, to the tyranny of the present moment detached from past wisdom or future consequence. True freedom - what the classical and Christian traditions understood as *libertas* - is the capacity to act in accordance with reason and virtue, to pursue genuine human goods rather than mere subjective preferences, to fulfil our nature as rational and social beings oriented towards truth and justice. This ordered freedom is not natural endowment but achieved capacity. It requires

formation, discipline, habituation to virtue. It emerges only within structures of obligation we did not choose: the faith that grounds our understanding of human dignity and purpose, the family that forms our character before we possess capacity for autonomous choice, the nation that provides the cultural and institutional framework within which our freedom can be meaningfully exercised.

This basic architecture of the politics of home is not cultural prejudice but discovered truth. It is not the mere preference of one civilisation among many, but the universal foundation without which genuinely human political life becomes impossible. The argument proceeds by excavating the deep structure of political order, moving

from moorings in the transcendent (faith) through generative source (family) to particular instantiation in a moral community (flag), culminating in the proper understanding of freedom as achievement downstream of unchosen obligations.

## FAITH A Mooring in Transcendence

The fundamental question of political philosophy can be stated simply enough: by what right does one man command another? Contemporary political theory, from Rawls’ original position to Habermas’ discourse ethics to various contractarian permutations, answers that authority derives from consent, from contract, from the rational agreement of autonomous individuals. That construal of authority appears liberating, yet it conceals a fatal contradiction. If authority ultimately rests on bare human agreement, then it possesses no binding force beyond transient equilibria of power. The social contract can be renegotiated whenever circumstances shift or democratic majorities change. Rights become mere positive grants, revocable at will; justice becomes whatever the sovereign declares it to be; and the distinction between legitimate government and tyranny disintegrates.

The classical world grasped this problem with admirable clarity. Cicero’s achievement in both *De Legibus* and *De Re Publica* was to articulate a vision of law as participation in eternal reason: ‘Law is the highest reason, implanted in Nature, which commands what ought to be done and forbids the opposite.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Legibus*, Book 1.6: ‘Lex est ratio summa, insita in natura, quae iubet ea quae faciendae sunt, prohibetque contraria.’



True law transcends positive enactment; it exists independently of human will, accessible to rational reflection, binding on all peoples at all times: ‘There will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times.’<sup>2</sup> Roman jurisprudence could extend across diverse cultures precisely because it claimed to rest not on Roman custom but on natural principles intrinsic to nature itself.

And yet, in the end, Cicero could not answer the deepest question his philosophy of natural law provoked, which is that if nature is merely the realm of physical causation governed by necessity, if there exists no cosmic intelligence ordering all things to their proper ends, then why should this “highest reason” be binding? The “ought” cannot be derived from the “is” without smuggling in precisely the metaphysical commitments that natural law theory requires but cannot establish on its own terms. The Stoic solution that nature itself is divine and that the cosmos is rational order provides no ground for obligation unless that rationality is understood as the will and wisdom of a personal God who creates, sustains, and orders all things to their divinely appointed ends.

It was First Temple Judaism and, later, Christianity that remedied this theoretical deficit by providing what Cicero could not: genuine ground for natural law’s authority. The Hebrew scriptures understood from the beginning the imperative of grounding law in divine promise and command. The covenant at Sinai is not negotiation but command: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.’<sup>3</sup> This is covenant, not contract. It is a relationship established by the superior party, creating obligations that precede and transcend individual consent. The Decalogue is not proposed for ratification by popular vote but revealed for obedience. Yet remarkably, this theocracy contains within itself the seeds of limited monarchy: the king himself is bound by Torah, required to copy the law with his own hand, prohibited from accumulating excessive wealth, wives, or military power. The prophets - Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Isaiah - speak God’s judgment against royal tyranny that provides a meta-constitutional constraint *avant la lettre*. On this view, sovereignty belongs ultimately to God alone, and all human authority is delegated, conditional, revocable. The structure of the Decalogue itself instructs in political

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 3.22: ‘[N]ec erit alia lex Romae, alia Athenis, alia nunc, alia posthac, sed et omnes gentes et omni tempore una lex et sempiterna et immutabilis continebit.’

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:2.

philosophy: the first tablet (duties to God) grounds the second (duties to neighbour). Why should I not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness? Without the vertical dimension - without recognition that human beings bear the divine image and that justice reflects God's character - these prohibitions become arbitrary social conventions.

When Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* declared that natural law is the rational creature's participation in the eternal law, he was not merely adding theological ornamentation to Cicero's jurisprudence. He was solving its fundamental problem. Eternal law was now explicitly understood as divine reason governing all creation, the providential wisdom of a personal God who orders the cosmos to its proper ends. Human positive law derives its binding force not from legislative will but from conformity to natural law, which participates in eternal law. This creates a hierarchy of eternal law, natural law, and human law according to which human legislation finds legitimacy only through ultimate participation in divine wisdom. The practical implications of this bear revolutionary ramifications for political philosophy. The sovereign can command only what natural law permits; beyond that boundary, his commands lack moral force and may justly be resisted. This is not theocracy inasmuch as it is not the direct rule of priests over temporal affairs, but something more subtle: the subordination of all earthly authority to transcendent justice. Political authority is real, derives from God, and generally merits obedience. But it is not absolute: it exists under judgment and it can be called to account by a law it did not make.

Without a transcendent theological foundation, freedom itself becomes unintelligible. Why should anyone possess rights that the state must respect? Why should individual conscience be inviolable? Why should there be limits to sovereign power? Liberal theory's answers - because rational agents would so agree in the original position, because utility is maximised, because human dignity demands it - all smuggle in premises they cannot justify in the absence of the theological foundations they reject. Human dignity, inviolability of conscience, limits to power: all these make sense only if human beings bear divine image, if there exists a justice not of human making, if sovereignty ultimately belongs to God rather than to any earthly authority. Remove the theological foundations, and these principles become mere assertions, incapable of withstanding determined challenge from those who find them inconvenient.

## FAMILY *Where Freedom Is Formed*

We have established that political authority must be grounded in transcendent truth. But this raises an immediate question: how does this transcendent truth shape human beings capable of living under ordered liberty? How do abstract principles become concrete dispositions? How does natural law written on the heart become habituated virtue capable of sustaining free institutions? The answer is that faith requires the concrete community of love to be incubated and passed on. Political community does not arise from isolated individuals in a state of nature agreeing to establish government. No such state ever existed and no such agreement ever occurred. Every human being begins life in a state of total dependence on a family, shaped by relationships he did not choose, inheriting obligations he never contracted, and formed by authorities to which he did not consent. The family is not one institution amongst others. It is the generative cell from which all political order grows, and, crucially,

it is the first and most important school of freedom.

This claim will seem paradoxical to the sensibilities of contemporary liberalism, which holds that freedom consists precisely in the liberation from all unchosen obligations. But the paradox dissolves once

we understand freedom properly. The child does not enter the world as a free agent or as a bundle of rights waiting to be exercised. He enters utterly helpless, driven by appetite, incapable of rational deliberation or moral judgment. His "freedom" at birth is merely potential, not actual, a capacity that must be cultivated through years of discipline, moral education, and gradual habituation to virtue.

Aristotle recognised this at the very beginning of the *Politics*: 'The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's everyday wants.'<sup>4</sup> Before citizenship, before political participation, before any exercise of freedom in the political sense, there must be the *oikos*, the household that provides not merely biological survival but moral formation. The family exists for reproduction, certainly, but more fundamentally for the raising and education of the next generation. Within this primary community, the child learns foundational capacities without which freedom is impossible: obedience to legitimate authority (the parent who knows more than the child and exercises authority for the child's good), respect

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.

for others (siblings and elders whose needs must be considered alongside one's own), subordination of immediate desire to long-term good (the discipline of delayed gratification), and fulfilment of obligation even when inconvenient (the unchosen duties that constitute family membership).

The father does not rule because his children contracted with him, since no child ever consented to his own begetting. He rules because God ordained that children require parental governance during their formation. This authority arises naturally and is not mediated by consent. And that is precisely what makes the family the proper school of freedom. The child who learns healthy respect for legitimate parental authority, who experiences authority exercised not as arbitrary caprice but as pastoral care oriented towards his flourishing, develops the capacity to recognise and submit to legitimate authority in political life. Conversely, the child who experiences only tyrannical arbitrariness or, worse, the complete dissolution of parental authority, will lack the moral foundations necessary for citizenship in a free society.

To endorse such a conception of the function of family is not to endorse tyranny. Filial piety does not require servile submission to the caprice of a father or mother. Authority exists for the sake of peace, which not merely absence of conflict but positive harmony in which each member fulfils his proper role and contributes to common flourishing. The father's authority is not unlimited dominion, but pastoral care oriented towards the maturation and eventual independence of children. The good father prepares his children for freedom by forming them in virtue, transmitting not merely biological life but moral wisdom, cultural inheritance, and practical judgment. Tyranny is the corruption of this legitimate authority, not its essence—the father who rules by caprice, who exercises power for his own gratification rather than his children's good, who demands servile obedience rather than cultivating mature judgment, has betrayed his paternal vocation. The first society is not the political community but the family, which exists to fulfil needs that isolated individuals cannot meet: procreation and child-rearing (the demographic foundation of any polity), economic production (the household economy as base of the national economy), the transmission of culture (children learn language, religion, morality primarily within the family), and the cultivation of virtue (*pietas* - reverence for parents and ancestors - is the root of all social virtue).

Crucially, the family provides the economic foundation for political liberty. In *De Regno*, Aquinas argues that a kingdom of independent householders, each secure in property and capable of providing for family needs, will maintain freedom, whilst a kingdom of propertyless dependents will succumb to tyranny.

This echoes the insight of the brilliant and unjustly forgotten Sir John Fortescue, the fifteenth-century English jurist whose *De Laudibus Legum Angliae* would profoundly shape his nation's constitutional thought, namely that it is economic independence that grounds political independence. The freeholder, secure in his possessions and dependent on no master's favour, can resist tyranny, speak truth to power, and act as genuine citizen rather than servile subject. The man without property, by contrast, dependent on wages from distant employer or benefits from the state, cannot be truly free.

But the family's role extends beyond economic provision to something even more fundamental for freedom: the transmission of cultural inheritance across generations. Through family, we receive not only biological life but cultural inheritance: language learned at mother's knee, religious formation through family prayer, moral intuitions absorbed before we can articulate them, practical skills passed from parent to child through apprenticeship and example. This cultural transmission cannot be replaced by formal schooling. The school can build on foundations laid by family, but it cannot create those foundations *ex nihilo*. A child who comes to school already literate, morally formed, and culturally grounded will flourish; a child lacking these foundations will struggle no matter how strong the pedagogy.

As the great nineteenth-century French historian Augustin Fustel de Coulanges demonstrated in *The Ancient City*, in Classical Greece the connection between family, property, and cultural-religious transmission was explicit and institutionalised. The family was constituted by worship of ancestral gods: the maintenance of the sacred hearth fire, the performance of burial rites, the honour paid to the *manes* of dead ancestors. Marriage existed primarily to ensure continuity of worship by producing male heirs. The bride left her father's household gods to worship her husband's, a transition marked by elaborate religious ceremonies. Childlessness was a catastrophe not merely personally but religiously: without sons, the sacred fire would die, the ancestral rites would cease, and the dead would be abandoned. Property belonged to the family in perpetuity because the land contained ancestral tombs requiring perpetual worship. The *paterfamilias* was priest before he was a property-owner, and his authority was sacred before it was legal. De Coulanges's scholarship reveals that we moderns are attempting to maintain institutions, from private property to family autonomy and filial duty whose religious foundations we have destroyed. We preserve the forms whilst denying the substance and increasingly the forms themselves are collapsing as their inner logic ceases to be intelligible.

The family also creates diachronic duties flowing in both directions across generations: we honour

ancestors by preserving and transmitting what they bequeathed us; we serve descendants by living as responsible stewards of family resources, reputation, and tradition. The individual exists as link in a chain, not as autonomous atom whose life begins at birth and ends at death. This intergenerational perspective provides the temporal horizon necessary for true statesmanship: politicians motivated only by the next election cannot make decisions requiring present sacrifice for long-term benefit; but the father thinking of his children's inheritance can. Burke's famous conception of a nation as a 'partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn' is first experienced and learned within the family.

Without the family as school of virtue, freedom degenerates into licence. Individuals without any moral formation will rarely be capable of self-government. They will require extensive external control precisely because they lack internal governance. The paradox is that licence - the absence of restraint - produces not freedom but a different kind of slavery: slavery to demagoguery from those who promise to satisfy desires without limit. Ordered freedom emerges only from formation within structures of unchosen obligation. And that begins in the family.

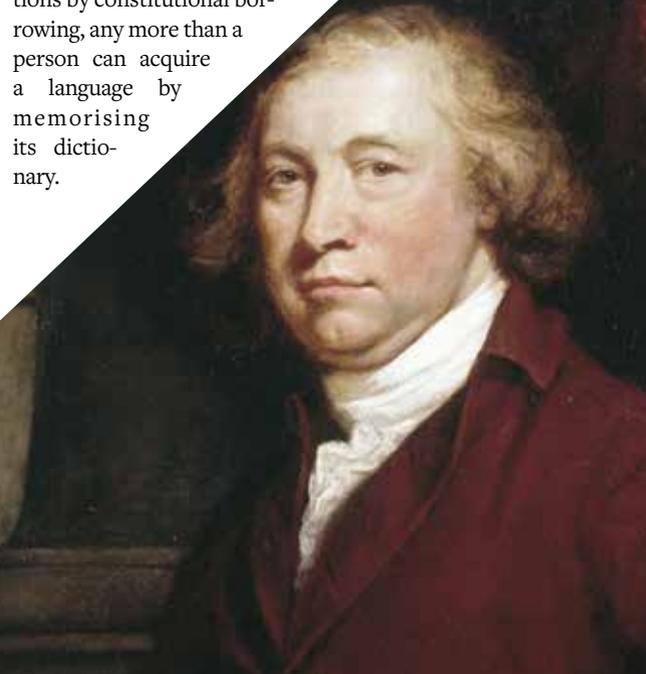
### FLAG Where Freedom Finds Its Home

If faith provides the transcendent foundation and family provides the generative formation in virtue, why are not enough? Why must there be a third dimension - that is, the particular national community, symbolised by the metonym of 'flag'? The question is crucial because the entire trajectory of progressive politics for at least two centuries has aimed at transcending national particularity in favour of universal humanity, whether through international law, supra-national institutions, or the gradual dissolution of borders in the name of human rights. The answer begins with a profound truth about freedom: it cannot exist in the abstract but only in concrete form, within particular communities that provide the institutional and cultural framework for its exercise. This is not a concession to human weakness but reflects the structure of human nature itself. We are not universal rational agents capable of exercising freedom anywhere, under any conditions, within any institutional framework. We are particular beings, existing in specific times and places, shaped by languages and customs we did not choose, capable of meaningful

action only within communities that we know and that know us.

Why should this be so? Because freedom as capacity for self-government is not natural endowment but cultural achievement. It requires what Aristotle called *hexis*, a settled disposition towards right action, developed through long immersion in practices that shape character and habit. One cannot acquire this capacity by reading constitutional texts or memorising political theory. It requires participation in living traditions, apprenticeship to inherited forms, gradual formation within institutions that embody the accumulated wisdom of generations.

This is why Fortescue that England's constitution is not *made* but *discovered*. It develops organically through immemorial custom 'whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary' (in the words of Sir William Blackstone). English law grows through precedent and practice, embedded in the collective experience of the nation, rather than being imposed by legislative fiat according to rational plan. This is what Michael Oakeshott would later call *tradition* as opposed to *technique*: knowledge embedded in practice, transmitted through participation and apprenticeship that is not reducible to explicit formulae or universal principles. Fortescue's England possesses the ability for self-government precisely because that capacity has been cultivated through centuries of participation in juridical and parliamentary institutions. Liberty is an organic inheritance, not a universal blueprint. A people lacking this historical formation cannot simply adopt English institutions by constitutional borrowing, any more than a person can acquire a language by memorising its dictionary.



But the necessity of national community runs even deeper than institutional development. As we have seen, de Coulanges demonstrated that political order was inseparable from religion, and religion was inseparable from particular place. The household was constituted by worship of ancestral gods, centred on the sacred hearth fire. The city (*civitas*) emerged from the religious union (*synoikismos*) of families and clans (*gentes*) under common civic gods. Each city had its own protecting deities; citizenship was religious membership, which is why exile was punishment worse than death. Law was originally sacred law, and the magistrate was priest before judge. The nation provides not just institutional framework but *moral framework*, the shared understanding of what constitutes the good life and what makes existence meaningful rather than merely tolerable.

Edmund Burke, writing three centuries after Fortescue amidst the French Revolution's opening acts, would provide the most complete philosophical articulation of the nation as moral community extended through time. Against the revolutionaries' claim to begin history anew based on abstract 'rights of man,' constructing political order on rational principles accessible to all humans regardless of historical circumstance, Burke insisted in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that the nation is a *moral* entity transcending any single generation. We inherit obligations to ancestors whose struggles and sacrifices made our existence possible; we bear duties to descendants whose world we are shaping by our choices; we are stewards, not owners, of an estate that must be passed on improved to posterity. This extension over time is essential for freedom. The individual who understands himself as a solitary subject, whose existence begins at birth and ends at death, who owes nothing to past and bears no responsibility for future, cannot exercise genuine freedom. He lacks the temporal horizon necessary for meaningful choice. His freedom reduces to present appetite-satisfaction, the tyranny of the immediate. But the individual who understands himself as inheritor and transmitter, who receives cultural and institutional inheritance from ancestors and bears duty to pass it on improved to descendants, possesses the temporal depth necessary for genuine freedom. He can make choices requiring present sacrifice for long-term benefit. He can subordinate immediate desire to enduring goods. He can participate in projects such constitutional maintenance, cultural transmission, and institutional preservation whose completion will outlive him.

### Freedom is not exercised in a vacuum but within particular legal frameworks, political institutions, cultural expectations.

'Prescription' is Burke's preferred term for this diachronic legitimacy: constitutional arrangements that have persisted for generations, surviving the test of changing circumstances and scrutiny of successive generations, carry the presumption of wisdom. They embody the accumulated experience of countless individuals and communities facing the perennial challenges of human existence. This does not mean it is unchangeable: prescription is a defeasible presumption. But it does place the burden of proof on innovation: the reformer must demonstrate not merely that current arrangements are imperfect (everything human is imperfect), but that they have become intolerable and that his proposed remedy will not cause greater evils than it cures. Moreover, even justified reforms should be undertaken gradually, preserving as much of existing structure as possible, because institutions form organic wholes in which elements are interdependent in ways not always visible to rational analysis. Revolutionary change involving the wholesale destruction of inherited institutions to remake society according to an abstract plan is not bold progress but reckless vandalism.

Burke also understood the importance of organic communities mediating between individual and abstraction: 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.'<sup>5</sup> We do not begin with universal benevolence towards humanity in the abstract and then extend this systematically to particular persons. Human psychology does not work that way. We begin with love of those nearest us - parents, siblings, friends - and this particular love gradually extends concentrically outward to neighbourhood, parish, county, and nation. The cosmopolitan who claims to love all humanity equally whilst despising his own family and people is not a moral hero but a psychological impossibility. We can only love what we actually know; and we can only know what we encounter in concrete experience.

The nation is the largest community that can still command such knowledge and therefore such love. It is large enough for cultural achievement and effective defence but small enough for mutual recognition and genuine solidarity. Beyond the nation lies either empire, which imposes uniformity by force and destroys

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 40.

local particularities, or abstract humanity, which commands no one's actual loyalty and provides no basis for mutual obligation. Yet the necessity of national particularity does not contradict but rather instantiates the universality of natural law and divine justice. Just as universal human nature requires particular languages for its expression, so universal natural law requires particular national communities for its emergence. The English constitution embodies the patient discovery through centuries of forms consonant with both divinely sanctioned natural law and the particular genius of the English people. It is neither pure divine decree nor arbitrary human construction but the gradual unfolding of political order that participates in transcendent justice whilst respecting human agency and historical particularity. Universal truth does not obliterate but rather fulfils genuine particularity, just as divine justice does not abolish but perfects natural human goods.

Freedom, then, is a *national* achievement, not a universal endowment. Different nations cultivate different forms of liberty, shaped by their particular histories, institutions, and moral traditions. English constitutional liberty is not identical to American republican liberty, which differs from Swiss confederal liberty. Each is genuine freedom, but each is particular, rooted in specific institutional developments and specific historical experiences. The attempt to export freedom as a universal template, divorced from the particular conditions that make it possible, produces not liberty but chaos. This has been amply demonstrated by the failed attempts to transplant Western democratic institutions to societies lacking the cultural preconditions, from post-colonial Africa to post-invasion Iraq and post-Soviet Russia.

## ORDERED FREEDOM

We have now established three foundations: faith as transcendent ground of authority, family as the generative source of moral formation, and 'flag' as a flesh-and-blood community that encompasses a civic and cultural landscape. We are now in a position to address directly what freedom is and why it must exist downstream of the first three foundations rather than constituting their starting point. For the entire edifice of modern political thought rests on a fundamental inversion: it begins with freedom understood as natural endowment, as pre-political capacity possessed by individuals in the state of nature, which political society then threatens to constrain. The purpose of politics, in this view, is to protect natural liberty against encroachment and to maintain the largest possible sphere of individual autonomy consistent with similar liberty for others. This is the freedom of Hobbes's sovereign-creating individuals escaping the

state of nature, of Locke's property-owning citizens consenting to government, of Rousseau's general will expressing collective autonomy, of Kant's rational agents legislating universal law, of Mill's harm principle delimiting legitimate interference, and of Rawls's original position generating principles of justice.

This conception is plainly mistaken. Freedom is not a natural endowment but an achieved capacity. It is not an *arche* but a *telos*, not what we possess by nature but what we become through formation. Far from being threatened by faith, family, and flag, freedom is made possible by them. To understand why, we must distinguish between two fundamentally different conceptions of freedom, a distinction with roots in ancient philosophy but systematically obscured by modern political theory. The first is negative or arbitrary freedom, which understands liberty as absence of constraint: I am free to the extent that nothing prevents me from doing whatever I want. This is the freedom of the unencumbered self, the autonomous individual who stands prior to all social bonds and chooses which commitments to assume. It is freedom as spontaneity, as will unbound by external determination, as capacity for arbitrary choice unconstrained by inherited obligation or transcendent truth.

The second is positive or ordered freedom understands liberty as the capacity to act in accordance with reason and virtue, to pursue genuine human goods rather than mere subjective preferences, to fulfil our nature as rational and social beings oriented towards truth and justice. This is freedom as self-mastery rather than self-assertion, freedom as rational government of appetite rather than appetite's gratification, freedom as capacity for genuinely human flourishing rather than mere absence of external constraint. It is the freedom described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, by Cicero in *De Officiis*, by Augustine in *De Libero Arbitrio*, by Aquinas in his treatment of *liberum arbitrium*, by the entire classical and Christian tradition.

These are not merely different emphases or complementary aspects of a unified concept. They are fundamentally incompatible understandings. And the difference between them is the difference between civilisation and barbarism, between sustainable political order and inevitable descent into tyranny. Consider a simple example: the addict who acts on his craving for his drug of choice. He does what he wants. No external authority prevents his action. He possesses negative freedom in the fullest sense: his will is unconstrained, his choice is voluntary, his action is unimpeded. Yet he is enslaved. His 'wanting' is itself determined by chemical dependency, not by rational deliberation about genuine goods. He cannot *not* want the drug; he cannot deliberate effectively about whether satisfying this want conduces to his flourishing; he cannot subordinate this immediate craving to long-term goods.

He possesses negative freedom (absence of external constraint) but utterly lacks positive freedom (capacity to act in accordance with his own rational judgment about what is truly good for him).

Now consider the opposite case: the virtuous person who routinely subordinates immediate appetite to long-term good, who fulfils obligations even when inconvenient, who contributes to common goods even when private benefit would suggest defection, who resists temptations that would provide immediate pleasure but undermine genuine flourishing. This person appears constrained by duty and limited by obligation. His will is not spontaneous but disciplined, his choices are not arbitrary but governed by reason, his actions are not unconstrained but directed towards genuinely good ends. Yet he is genuinely free: he possesses self-mastery, the capacity to act in accordance with reason rather than passion, the ability to pursue genuine goods rather than apparent goods, the power to govern himself rather than being governed by appetite.

The crucial point is that this second freedom - ordered freedom, true freedom - is not natural endowment. An infant possesses neither. The child is driven by appetite and cannot deliberate effectively about genuine goods. The transformation from infant to free person requires formation: years of parental authority, discipline, moral education, habituation to virtue. And this formation occurs through faith, family, and flag. Faith provides the framework of meaning within which freedom finds its purpose and direction. Why should I subordinate appetite to reason? Why pursue virtue rather than pleasure? Why fulfil obligations that inconvenience me? Why contribute to common goods when I could free-ride? Without transcendent foundation, these questions have no answer beyond subjective preference or arbitrary social convention. But faith reveals that human beings bear divine image, that we are oriented by nature towards truth and goodness, that our flourishing consists in rational and moral activity rather than mere appetite-satisfaction, that we are created for communion with God and neighbour rather than atomised self-seeking. Faith does not constrain freedom but orients it towards genuine goods, preventing the degradation of freedom into licence.

Family provides the primary formation without which freedom is impossible. The child is not born free. He is born helpless, driven by appetite, incapable of rational deliberation or moral judgment. His transformation into a free person—a person capable of

self-government—requires years of parental authority, discipline, moral education. The child must learn obedience before he can properly exercise autonomy. He must internalise virtue before he can reliably choose virtuously. He must habituate himself to self-control before he can govern himself. This formation occurs primarily in the family. The good parent does not simply constrain the child's natural freedom (the child possesses no such freedom to constrain) but cultivates the capacity for freedom that does not yet exist.

Flag (the national community) provides the institutional and cultural conditions within which freedom can be exercised. Freedom is not exercised in a vacuum but within particular legal frameworks, political institutions, cultural expectations. The English free-man's liberty to own property securely depends on English constitutional protections developed over centuries. The American citizen's freedom of speech depends on First Amendment protections and cultural norms supporting robust public discourse. These are not natural endowments but historical achievements,

maintained across generations through particular national communities. Remove the individual from this framework and his freedom vanishes, regardless of his internal virtue.

Thus freedom emerges only downstream of unchosen obligations. The individual does not choose to be born, does not choose his parents or his nation, does not choose the language he

speaks or the cultural inheritance he receives. These are givens, constraints, limitations on pure autonomy. But they are not obstacles to freedom. They are its preconditions. The attempt to construct freedom upstream of these obligations produces not greater liberty but its opposite. Consider what happens when we attempt this inversion. The emancipated liberal individual, unbound by religious authority, family obligation, or national loyalty, appears to be maximally free. He has escaped all unchosen constraints, all inherited obligations, all transcendent claims on his will. He stands as pure autonomous agent, sovereign over his own life, creating his own values, defining his own identity. This is the promise of negative freedom taken to its logical conclusion: the unencumbered self of liberal theory.

But observe the reality: such individuals are not powerful but paralysed, not self-governing but un-governed, not free but adrift. They lack the moral formation necessary for self-mastery (the family having been dissolved or rendered optional). They lack the

**Freedom is not a natural endowment but an achieved capacity. It is not an *arche* but a *telos*, not what we possess by nature but what we become through formation. Far from being threatened by faith, family, and flag, freedom is made possible by them.**

cultural resources necessary for meaningful choice (the national community having been dismissed as arbitrary constraint). They lack the transcendent orientation necessary to distinguish genuine goods from mere apparent goods (faith having been rejected as superstition). Their freedom degenerates into anxious self-creation, endless pursuit of experiences that fail to satisfy, vulnerability to demagoguery from those promising meaning and purpose, and ultimately dependence on extensive state management of their chaotic lives.

Moreover, societies composed of such individuals cannot sustain freedom. Self-government, whether personal or collective, requires virtue. It requires citizens capable of subordinating passion to reason, immediate gratification to long-term good, private interest to common welfare. But these capacities are not natural. They must be cultivated through formation in faith, family, and flag. A society that treats these as optional constraints on natural liberty rather than necessary conditions for its development will produce citizens incapable of self-government. Such citizens will require extensive external control precisely because they lack internal governance. The paradox, then, is that negative freedom risks provoking the tyranny it claims to prevent. People incapable of self-mastery must be mastered by others. The dissolution of faith, family, and flag does not liberate but rather requires an ever-expanding administrative state to manage the chaos produced by millions of atomised individuals lacking the internal governance that these institutions once provided. This is precisely what we observe in late-modern Western societies: the simultaneous celebration of individual autonomy and the metastatic growth of bureaucratic control over ever-more-detailed aspects of life.

Thomas Aquinas articulated the proper understanding in his treatment of law and governance in the *Summa Theologiae*. Human law must promote virtue, not merely coordinate wills or prevent obvious harms. The purpose of political community is not to maximise negative freedom but to secure the common good, the conditions enabling all citizens to pursue their proper end, which includes development of virtue and capacity for genuine flourishing. This requires far more than protection of individual autonomy. Aquinas also articulated the principle of prudence as the master political virtue. Prudence is not mere cleverness or expedient calculation but requires both understanding of universal principles (what Aquinas calls *synderesis* or the habit of first practical principles) and accumulated experience enabling application of those principles to complex, changing situations. The prudent statesman knows both natural law and his nation's character, both universal human nature and his people's particular genius, both timeless moral truths



and the contingent circumstances of his historical moment. This is why Oakeshott's distinction between technique and tradition is so crucial: political wisdom cannot be reduced to technique - to explicit formulae or universal algorithms - because it consists largely of traditional knowledge embedded in practice and transmitted through participation.

## CONCLUSION *Homecoming or Homelessness?*

We stand at a civilisational crossroads. The crisis we face is not primarily economic, though our economic dysfunction is pervasive and real. Nor is it primarily political, though political institutions are failing. It is fundamentally spiritual: we have attempted to maintain our inherited moral intuitions - the equal dignity of persons, universal human rights, compassion for the weak, progress towards justice - whilst abandoning the metaphysical foundations that alone once rendered these intuitions coherent. This impasse cannot continue indefinitely. Either we recover the foundations, or the superstructure will collapse.

The choice before us is not between progress and reaction but between two fundamentally incompatible visions of human existence. On one side stands the liberal-progressive vision: man as autonomous individual, politics as technique for coordinating individual preferences, society as aggregate of rights-bearing atoms pursuing self-defined goods, history as linear progress from superstition towards enlightenment, the future as realm of unlimited possibility unconstrained by past. This vision promises liberation but delivers atomisation, isolated individuals facing distant, unresponsive bureaucracies, lacking the solidarities and local knowledge that make political participation meaningful, incapable of genuine dwelling because severed from the sources of meaning that transcend individual will. Most critically, it promises freedom but produces its opposite: people incapable of self-government who therefore require extensive external control, the simultaneous celebration of autonomy and metastatic growth of administrative power.

On the other side stands the conservative vision articulated in this essay does not promise utopia: conservatives know that, as Augustine taught, the City of Man (*civitas terrena*) cannot become the City of God (*civitas Dei*) through human effort. But it

offers something more valuable than utopian fantasy, namely the possibility of genuine dwelling, of - as Martin Heidegger famously put it - being-at-home-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*), and of inhabiting a meaningful order that connects present to past and future. Most critically, it offers genuine freedom, not the licence that degenerates into slavery but the ordered liberty that emerges through formation in faith, family, and flag. The conservative task is to preserve and transmit the conditions that make such dwelling possible: roots deep in sacred soil, connecting present to past and future; loyalty to the dead who bequeathed us civilisation and to the unborn who will inherit our choices; love for the particular that opens onto the universal, for we can grasp transcendent truth only through concrete instantiation, can love humanity only by loving *these* particular persons, can serve the common good only within *this* particular community. This is not reaction but renewal. The perennial wisdom that each generation must rediscover if human life is to remain human, if politics is

to serve human flourishing rather than abstract ideologies, if we are to dwell poetically upon the earth rather than merely exist in bureaucratic administered zones.

The recovery of these four foundations, properly construed as an interwoven architectonic structure rather than separate principles, is not atavistic longing for a past that never was,

but a restoration of permanent things. These are realities corresponding to unchanging human nature, without which no civilisation can in the end survive and without which human life becomes a homeless existence. The choice lies before us: the patient cultivation of conditions for human flourishing, or the continued dismantling of everything that makes such flourishing possible. For us moderns, it is either homecoming or homelessness. There is no third way. ▀

**The choice lies before us: the patient cultivation of conditions for human flourishing, or the continued dismantling of everything that makes such flourishing possible. For us moderns, it is either homecoming or homelessness. There is no third way.**



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## The Foundations of Civilisation

# AUTHORITY, EDUCATION, TRANSMISSION

Franco Nembrini

**I**s it still possible to educate in today's world? The question is simple and the answer is clear: yes. In any situation – even the most negative, as documented, for example, by Janus Korkzak's extreme experience in Treblinka – education is always possible.

Of course, in order for my answer not to be a mere statement of principle, and for educational intervention to be effective, it is necessary for the educator to take into account all the factors of the situation in which it takes place and to offer their proposal in appropriate terms. For this reason, I will divide my speech into two parts.

The first: what are the fundamental characteristics of the society in which education takes place today? The second: what are – consequently – the characteristics of an educational action that wants to be effective today?

One of the most acute descriptions of the situation of the younger generations in the Western world is found in the book by Michel Serres, a French academic, *Petite Poucette*. 'Without us realising it, in the short interval that separates us from the 1970s, a new type of human being has been born. He or she no longer has the same body, the same life expectancy, no longer communicates in the same way, no longer perceives the same world, no longer inhabits the same

space. [...] No longer having the same mind as their parents, he or she knows in a different way. He or she writes in a different way. [...] They no longer speak the same language'<sup>1</sup>. Should anyone think this is an exaggeration, they can do two things. The first would be to read Serres' book, which documents point by point what he summarises here. The second is to *actually* spend time with young people. If they do, they will realise that everything Serres writes is true.

One last observation I take from Serres: 'Better still, they have all become individuals [...]

The individual no longer knows how to live as a couple, he divorces; he no longer knows how to behave in class, he fidgets and chats; he no longer prays in church. Everyone says that ideologies are dead: it is the affiliations they recruited that are disappearing. [...] Like an atom without valence,

Pollicina is completely naked'<sup>2</sup>. In other words, one could say that a key characteristic of our young people is *loneliness*, 'one of the most insidious evils of our time'<sup>3</sup>.

**Parallel to the spread of consumerism, attitudes and behaviours developed that radically challenged it, and with consumerism they challenged all traditional civilisation and culture.**

<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres, *Petite Poucette*, Le Pommier, Paris 2012, pp. 15–16. Translations by the author.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>3</sup> Mattia Ferraresi, *Solitudine*, Einaudi, Turin 2020, p. 3.



While there is undoubtedly an epidemic of loneliness, its origins are remote, as Mattia Ferraresi observes. ‘Loneliness is a product of modernity, which emerged with the affirmation of the individual, a process that has its roots in the sensibility of the Italian Renaissance literati’<sup>4</sup>. ‘In the fulfilment of that exciting process of liberation from constraints, dogmas, traditions, authorities and structures that goes by the name of modernity, the individual finally found himself alone. And with some surprise, he found this condition, achieved with so much effort and sacrifice, rather bleak’<sup>5</sup>.

For centuries, the individualism that emerged during the Renaissance remained largely confined to the upper classes of society, while the vast majority of the population continued to live according to Christian values, both Catholic and Protestant. The values and forms of the Christian tradition gave individuals a place in the cosmos and in the community, and ensured a role for authority and education.

However, even though the Christian tradition remained dominant in terms of public visibility, it was slowly undergoing a transformation from within.

As Don Luigi Giussani, an Italian priest who sparked a great movement of education in the faith in the second half of the 20th century, observed: ‘Dieu seul est grand, mes frères’: God alone is great, my brothers. Thus the famous orator Jean-Baptiste Massillon

began his funeral oration for the Sun King in Notre Dame Cathedral. The death of Louis XIV of France is a sign of the era in which reason claimed to occupy all the space of God’s intervention in man, in every sense. Therefore, the Church [...] took up a defensive position at the pastoral level to defend the morality of the people, taking for granted the evidence [...] of dogmatic content. This led to a lack of defence and nourishment of the faith of God’s people, since it is through cultural activity that the life of a people deepens and becomes historically generative [...]. Now, it is as if we were overwhelmed by the extreme consequences of the rationalist rebellion against the living God who revealed himself to man<sup>6</sup>.

This is exactly what happened: corroded at its foundations, the Christian tradition in Western Europe collapsed almost suddenly in the aftermath of

the Second World War, driven first by the rapid rise of the consumer society and then by the protest movements of 1968. ‘Until the middle of the twentieth century,’ writes Olivier Roy in *Is Europe Still Christian?*, ‘it was taken for granted that the dominant mentality was a secularised Christianity. [...] Basically, the morality of the French with a secular tradition did not differ from the morality defended by the Church [...]’.

However, everything changed in the 1960s, starting with two simultaneous movements: the ‘aggiornamento’ brought about by the Second Vatican Council to Catholicism, and the sexual revolution that erupted in that decade. It was the latter that produced the real de-Christianisation, which consisted not so much in the collapse of religious practice as in the emergence of a new anthropology centred on human freedom<sup>7</sup>. It is the same dynamic that Pier Paolo Pasolini notes with regard to Italy: ‘The previous ideology desired and imposed by those in power was, as we know, religion, and Catholicism was, in fact, formally the only cultural phenomenon that ‘standardised’ Italians. Now it has become a competitor of that new ‘homogenising’ cultural phenomenon that is mass hedonism: and, as a competitor, the new power has already begun to liquidate it for some years now.

In fact, there is nothing religious about the model of the Young Man and Young Woman proposed and imposed by television. They are two people who validate life only through its consumer goods (and, of course, they still go to mass on Sundays: by car).’<sup>8</sup>.

Parallel to the spread of consumerism, attitudes and behaviours developed that radically challenged it, and with consumerism they challenged all traditional civilisation and culture: ‘The antagonistic force of the youthful archetype is disruptive: it ridicules the authority of parents, the intransigence of teachers, the repression of the police, the power of ministers’<sup>9</sup> until it explodes in the riots of 1968, in the illusions they aroused, in the trail of blood they left in their wake – especially in Italy, but not only there – and finally in the disappointment of so many who realised they had ‘seen

within reach / a marvellous victory that did not exist’<sup>10</sup>. ‘We thought we were changing the world, but instead the world changed us,’ comments sadly one of the protagonists of the film *We All Loved Each Other So Much*<sup>11</sup>.

In reality, the youth culture of the 1960s and the protests of 1968 did change something – and in this, consumerism and its opponents were allies: they destroyed the value of authority.

We must recognise that this criticism of authority also had good reasons. Here too, the roots of the problem go back a long way. As Mauro Magatti and Monica Martinelli explain in *La porta dell'autorità* (*The Door of Authority*), in the modern era, ‘authority tends to coincide with the exercise of power, with the consequence of reducing, to the point of eliminating, the space for creation for those who follow’<sup>12</sup>. With the disappearance of the reference – real, though often not formal – to the supreme authority of God, too often in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, fathers began to see themselves as absolute authorities, masters of their children’s lives<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, the attack on authority in the 1960s became a good opportunity to rediscover its true nature. The notion of *auctoritas*, authority – Magatti and Martinelli explain – originated in the Roman world and is distinct from that of *potestas*, power. *Potestas* refers to the right to command, to impose rules, and depends exclusively on the position that the person holds. The notion of *auctoritas*, on the other hand, is more complex. On the one hand, ‘*the auctor and auctoritas* are originally located

with- in the sphere of the sacred’<sup>14</sup>: the root of authority lies in fidelity to one’s origins and in the authenticity with which the person embodies that fidelity in their own life. On the other hand, ‘authority does not limit the freedom of others: it becomes ‘binding’ *only and precisely because* others perceive that it addresses their freedom as such. [...] *The auctor* is in fact both the one who ‘increases’, ‘augments’, ‘expands’ - meanings associated with the verb *augere* - and the one who dares, giving birth to something new while, at the same time, continually embarking on the adventure of living. [...] A process that is accomplished by recognising that the truth of the self, like that of the other – and of life – is something over which our power has no hold’<sup>15</sup>. ‘*The auctor* is, therefore, the one who is capable of initiating and directing, [...] who does not limit himself, therefore, to increasing, much less identifying himself with giving orders’<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Pier Paolo Paolini, *Poesia della tradizione*, in Id., *Trasumanar e organizzar*, Garzanti, Milan 1971, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *We All Loved Each Other So Much*, directed by Ettore Scola, Italy 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Mauro Magatti – Monica Martinelli, *The Door of Authority*, Vita e pensiero, Milan 2021, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> As documented, among other things, in Gavino Ledda’s book, *Padre padrone*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1975, which played an important role in Italy in spreading the idea of an exclusively authoritarian father. See also Alexander de Willebois, *Conversazioni eterodosse. Identità, paternità, senso del sacro*, Jaca Book, Milan 1980, pp. 16-18 (original title *Le sens du sacré*, publisher unknown).

The ancient Romans already understood this! Authority is exactly this: a person committed to their own life, to the tradition they have received, to their

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

### Social media is scientifically designed to retain those who visit it and induce them to stay as long as possible, to ‘scroll’ through one image after another.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

<sup>6</sup> Luigi Giussani, *Man and His Destiny*, Marietti, Casale Monferrato 1999, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Olivier Roy, *Is Europe Still Christian?*, Feltrinelli, Milan 2019, p. 43 (original edition *L'Europe est-elle chrétienne?*, Editions du Seuil 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Corsair Writings), Garzanti, Milan 1977, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Claudio Widmann, *C'era un ragazzo che come me. L'eternità breve dell'archetipo giovanile* (There Was a Boy Like Me: The Brief Eternity of the Youthful Archetype), Edizioni Magi, Rome 2017, p. 60.



own destiny, who offers this lived tradition to the freedom of young people and accompanies them in rediscovering it, without claiming to possess them, ready to rejoice when the freedom of others generates “something that surprises the author himself”<sup>17</sup>.

In summary, we could say that the young people of the 1960s were right to rebel against an authority reduced to power; at the same time, they were calling, perhaps unconsciously, for an authority that was truly authoritative, that pointed to a ‘beyond’ and that would relaunch their freedom. Only very rarely did they find it.

These observations on authority introduce us to the second part of our journey, the challenges of education today. And here I will state it right away: the crisis in education today is not a crisis of young people, it is a crisis of adults. This is something that many recognise. ‘If this generation is anxious, it is our fault as adults,’ observes Pier Cesare Rivoltella, professor of pedagogy at the University of Bologna. ‘Young people suffer from a “loss of the future” because ours is a society of uncertainty, but we are the ones who built it that way. If they are anxious, it is because they cannot find meaningful role models among adults who are able to listen to them’<sup>18</sup>. The responsibility, echoes Matteo Lancini, psychologist, lies with ‘this chaotic and individualistic society, characterised by the loss of significance of adults, who are themselves fragile and focused only on themselves’<sup>19</sup>.

The difficulties of today’s young people are a sign of the failure of a generation of adults who have either given up on the task of educating them or are trying to do so in the wrong way.

To explain this point, I often refer to the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke* 15:11-32). The story is one of the best known in the Gospels: a son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, leaves and squanders everything, until he is reduced to poverty; then he returns, mortified, asking to be taken back as a servant; but the father welcomes him with open arms and throws a big party, ‘for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’ (*Lk* 15:24). It is such a well-known story that the behaviour of the father – who, in Jesus’ words, is obviously God the Father – seems natural to us. However, if we think about our own experience, it is not natural at all. Let us try to put ourselves in the shoes of the thousands of real fathers who at some point hear their son say (who hasn’t been there?) ‘I hate living at home, I’m leaving’. What are the most common reactions? I see three.

The first is that of those who simply give up on educating their children and quietly let them ‘learn from experience’. I see two main factors behind this resignation. The first is the mistaken sense of freedom that prevails today, whereby freedom is simply doing whatever one feels like, whatever one’s instincts dictate at the moment. The second is the abandonment, even by parents, of all criteria of value, the equivalence of all behaviour. The result is a father and mother who let their child do whatever they want, because anyway, ‘if that’s how they feel’, it’s fine.

Then there are the reactions of those who do not give up trying to educate, but do so in inappropriate ways.

The first inadequate reaction: ‘No way, I’m locking the door, you’re staying here’. This is the reaction of parents we might call ‘conservative’: inherited truths are not to be questioned, you must live as you always have. It is the temptation to exercise authority as power (as we have seen), to restrict children’s freedom in order to ensure their happiness. A very human temptation, but a wrong one, as I learned many years ago from Don Luigi Giussani: “The temptation of power over souls is a temptation that we all have. Power over souls: to possess them for their own good; to take away their freedom to ensure their happiness. Christ died to leave freedom in us! Now, the more powerfully we desire the freedom of our pupils, that is, that they reach their destiny – and freedom reaches its destiny the more powerfully we desire this – the more painfully and miraculously our respect for their decision deepens. There can be no happiness for them that they have not chosen, no destiny that they have not recognised and accepted”<sup>20</sup>.

The second inappropriate reaction, which at first glance appears to be the opposite but is actually symmetrical, is that of parents we might call ‘progressive’: ‘Fine, I’ll come with you’. On the surface, this second temptation accepts the child’s freedom. In reality, this is not true: this father thinks that his child cannot face the world alone, thinks that he always needs a father – or a mother, it’s the same thing – to watch over him. And what is the consequence when the child experiences the disastrous result of his choices first-hand? That his father is there with him, and therefore *he has no home to return to!*

What does the father in the parable do instead – who is the eternal Father, and therefore the model of all authentic fatherhood and parenthood? *He simply stays*: he continues to live what gives meaning to his life, in the certainty that sooner or later his son will understand – through experience, not words – his mistake and return. Mind you, he does not simply let his

<sup>20</sup> Luigi Giussani, *Reality and Youth: The Challenge*, Rizzoli, Milan 2018, p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Pier Cesare Rivoltella, in *La lettura*, weekly supplement to *Corriere della Sera*, 15 December 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Matteo Lancini, in *Corriere della Sera*, 5 November 2025.

## “ Social media is scientifically designed to retain those who visit it and induce them to stay as long as possible, to ‘scroll’ through one image after another

son go, like a parent who gives up: he lets him go because he respects his freedom to the fullest; but every evening he stands at the window waiting, certain that his son will return.

This is the guideline, this is the model for an adult who truly wants to educate today. In the thousands of meetings I have with teachers and parents, I often illustrate this with two very simple examples.

The first is the example of trees. What do trees do? They perform chlorophyll photosynthesis: they absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Why is it so pleasant to walk in a forest? Because the air is pure, it is oxygenated. Do trees care about those who pass through the woods? No: they do their job, they purify the air. This is the task of adults: to do their job, to purify the air. What does it mean, leaving the metaphor aside, to purify the air? It means absorbing all the evil in the world and giving back the good. It means living a life certain that good exists and that it wins. It means living a life so joyful that our children look up from their electronic devices and, looking at us, say: ‘Mum, Dad, teacher, I want to be as happy as you are’.

The second is the example of the sea. Today, it is as if young people were living in a basin in the middle of the desert. In the middle of the basin there is a little water, but it is dirty, swampy water. Young people see nothing else and are content with this. The adult is someone who climbs up to the edge of the basin and from there sees the sea in the distance and says to everyone: “Look, there is the sea! There is the sea, there is a bigger horizon, there is a way of living life that is bigger than the narrow horizon in which your smartphones and social media confine you”. Except that the

children are happy with their little bit of water, while the adult is proposing a long and tiring march through the desert: why should they follow him? The children will only find the energy to face the journey if they see at least a reflection of the sea shining in the eyes of the person calling them.

And so we come to the topic of technology, which is crucial in all discussions about education today. There are a thousand voices blaming the crisis in education on smartphones, social media and artificial intelligence. I am of the opinion that this is not the root of the problem.

Of course, I understand perfectly well that modern media has extraordinary power, that their ability to penetrate the lives of young people – and not only young people – has a frightening force. Among other things, it seems to me that social media is the most perfect realisation of the educational ideal outlined by Rousseau in *Emile*. How, one might ask, can you criticise *Emile*, the hymn to libertarian education, the sacred text of modern pedagogy? Let us read Rousseau’s words: ‘Always let him believe that he is the master, but always be the one holding the reins. There is no subjection so perfect as that which preserves the appearance of freedom: his very will is thus in your hands. Is not the poor child, who knows nothing, can do nothing, knows nothing, entirely in your power? [...] Are you not free to influence him as you please? [...] Undoubtedly, he must do only what he wants, but he must want only what you want.’<sup>21</sup>

Social media is scientifically designed to retain those who visit it and induce them to stay as long as possible, to ‘scroll’ through one image after another, to take in everything that is offered there, without any ‘imposition’. Is this not the perfect realisation of Rousseau’s ideal? On social media, at first glance, no one imposes anything on anyone, no one forces you to stay there and look at what I propose. At the same time, there is nothing more false than this apparent ‘freedom’: everything is done so that ‘the poor child who knows nothing, can do nothing, knows nothing’ is ‘entirely in your power’: he enters a social network, convinced that he is doing what he wants, and instead he falls deeper and deeper into the trap that someone has set for him! Spontaneity always turns into totalitarianism, the ‘tyranny of emotions’<sup>22</sup> becomes submission to those who know how to skilfully manipulate emotions.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, *Emilio*, cit., p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> See Paolo d’Angelo, *La tirannia delle emozioni (The Tyranny of Emotions)*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2020.

Having said all this, I remain convinced that the spread of young people's addiction to smartphones and social media is not a cause but a consequence of our educational failure. I refer here to a book that has recently sparked a great deal of debate, *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt. In this book, Haidt documents the disastrous effects of early exposure to the internet on the cognitive and emotional development of our children, and his observations are indisputable. However, in the first part of the book, Haidt himself analyses the educational context that prepared, encouraged and accompanied the explosion of social media addiction, identifying its main characteristic as a negative attitude towards the world: 'The most important change [...] was the growing sense that everything and everyone was a threat to children'<sup>23</sup>. 'This is the world in which Gen Z grew up. A world in which adults, schools and other institutions worked together to teach children that the world is dangerous and prevent them from facing the risks, conflicts and emotions their brains needed [...] to overcome anxiety and set their minds to discovery mode'<sup>24</sup>. 'Parents [...] have lost so much trust in their fellow citizens and their children that many now approve of the almost total elimination of freedom in childhood'<sup>25</sup>. The paradoxical result is that 'we are overprotecting our children in the real world while not protecting them enough online'<sup>26</sup>.

These are observations with which I fully agree. In the many meetings I have with parents, I see that their prevailing attitude towards the world is *fear*: all their educational efforts are aimed at defending their children from a world they perceive as hostile, and they prefer to see them 'safe' in front of a screen rather than let them run the risk of getting hurt on a playground or, when they are older, getting involved in some experience that is not under their total control.

From this point of view, I was greatly comforted by Pope Leo XIV's recent Apostolic Letter on education. 'To inhabit these spaces' – here Pope Leo refers to the spaces of the digital environment – 'we must [...] avoid any technophobia. Our attitude towards technology can never be hostile, because technological progress is part of God's plan for creation'<sup>27</sup>. This is also because, as the Pope continues, "in any case, no algorithm can replace what makes education human: poetry, irony,

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, Rizzoli, Milan 2024, p. 106. Original edition: *The Anxious Generation*, Penguin Press 2024.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> Leo XVI, Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, 9.2.



love, art, imagination, the joy of discovery and even education in error as an opportunity for growth"<sup>28</sup>.

"Poetry, irony, love, art, imagination, the joy of discovery": these are the words of education! I would add another, which not coincidentally appears in the title of the Apostolic Letter: hope. I do so with the words of Józef Tischner, a Polish priest and philosopher who in the early 1980s was a sort of chaplain to *Solidarność*:

*Between father and son there is a relationship of trusteeship of hope. The father is the trustee of his son's hope; he is its support and strength. We are the children of those in whose hands we have placed our hopes. So what does it mean to be a child? It means entrusting one's hope to someone else. What does it mean to be a father? It means becoming the trustee of someone else's hope. Hope is the source of our life. Therefore, the one who brings hope to man is man's spiritual father. [...]*

*It must be said: only those who have hope educate. To this we must add: they educate by forming the hope of those being educated. Education is a work that is done around the spirit, a work done according to hope. [...] Each of us has certainly had an educator. What do we owe them? I think I am not far from the truth if I answer: an awakening. Before, we walked through life without knowing what life really was, as if in a half-sleep. The voice of the educator woke us from this slumber. The rest we had to do ourselves. Socrates compared the work of the educator to that of a midwife who helps a mother give birth. Thanks to the work of the educator, a truth is born in the soul of man. This truth becomes man's strength.*<sup>29</sup>

The hope and gifts mentioned by the Pope are not cultivated with a view to education, but are gifts that an adult lives for himself. A joke I always use when I talk about education is that 'education is what happens when we don't have the problem of educating'. As Pasolini once observed: 'If someone had educated you, they could only have done so with their being, not with their words'<sup>30</sup>. Education is not made up of speeches, sermons, or warnings that we give to our children or students, 'nor [of] lessons on how to manage

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.3.

<sup>29</sup> Józef Tischner, *Ethics of Solidarity*, CSEO, Forlì 1981, pp. 106-107.

<sup>30</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, Einaudi, Turin 1976, p. 32.

emotions'<sup>31</sup>: education is the air they breathe (see the example of trees), education is the atmosphere they experience at home or in the classroom. An atmosphere that depends on how we adults feel about life, how we comment on world events, whether we ourselves have – to use Haidt's expressions again – a 'defence mode' or a 'discovery mode', an open or closed attitude towards reality, its challenges and its unexpected events.

There are two keys to regaining educational capacity. The first is that adults should not concern themselves with young people, but with themselves. The second is that we should not be afraid of the strange, rebellious, eccentric behaviour of young people, but understand that they are like Pinocchio's 'donkey's braying' (a book that I hope everyone knows, as it is one of the most translated Italian books...). We are in chapter XXXIII. Pinocchio, after five months in the

**This is the world in which Gen Z grew up. A world in which adults, schools and other institutions worked together to teach children that the world is dangerous and prevent them from facing the risks, conflicts and emotions their brains needed to overcome anxiety and set their minds to discovery mode...**

'Land of Toys', has become a donkey and is now performing as a trained donkey in a circus. As he suffers this terrible humiliation, he looks up and sees the Blue Fairy, the good woman who has saved him a thousand times, among the spectators. Then Pinocchio, overcome with enthusiasm at her presence, cries out: 'Oh, my Fairy! Oh, my Fairy!' But instead of these words, a bray so loud and prolonged came out of his throat that it made all

the spectators laugh'<sup>32</sup>. Allow me to refer here to the book I dedicated to *The Adventures of Pinocchio*:

*An extraordinary invention, because it captures the situation of all our children in a striking image.*

*What are our children, if not Pinocchios in search of their humanity, in a world that does everything it can to reduce them to beasts covered in ribbons? And when they see a flash of blue light, a glimpse of sky, something beautiful, what do our children do, like Pinocchio? They cry out, they beg. Except that they are incapable of doing so. They are incapable of articulating a truly human sound. Their poorly educated desire produces an inarticulate noise, a heart-rending cry. What are all their disorderly gestures, their excessive actions, their clumsy challenges, if not this braying of a donkey? The braying of a donkey, the cry of someone who asks for a glimpse of the sky but is unable to express their need properly; and so they hurl it towards the sky as best they can, in the somewhat animalistic ways that are the only ones they are capable of using.*

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *Op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, chap. XXXIII.

But the educator, the true adult, is the one who knows how to recognise the cry of the soul in the braying of the donkey. How often do young people challenge us, provoke us, throw gestures, behaviours and disguises in our faces that are truly donkey-like; but we have the task of recognising within these clumsy cries, within these donkey brays, the voice of their hearts asking for companionship, goodness, a meaning for life.<sup>33</sup>

To conclude, I would like to illustrate what I have said with three examples.

The first example is a letter written to me by a 'difficult' young person whom I hosted in my home for some time.

*Our generation has this problem, like all generations before and all those after. Hope is the problem. I have heard too many teachers and parents say: these young people no longer desire anything, they are not passionate about anything, beauty no longer captivates them... The question these teachers should be asking themselves, dear Franco, is not why we young people today seem to desire nothing, or how we can express our identity, but what they themselves hope for. Because then young people assimilate that hope as if it were manna from heaven, like air, even if they seem not to care. And young men will base their adult identity on this hope they have breathed. But hope must be real. Their hope, if it is real, is fascinating in itself, but it must be real, truly lived.*

*It must be true like that of my grandfather, who, during the war, was shipwrecked at sea for two days and two nights because his ship was sunk by the British, who saw many of his companions die horribly and who then saved himself, carrying with him the anguish and trauma of those days. And without psychologists or teachers of expressiveness, he raised a family, taught them to love, and to 'do things with the seven sacraments', as he liked to say.*

*Or my grandmother, who had a hump at the age of eight, who saw death in the streets during the war, who then set up her own shop, where she worked with sacrifice until old age. My little grandmother, whom I saw lift seventy kilos onto her shoulders and who taught us as children to kill snakes in the garden. She let herself be won over by my grandfather, who used to visit her in the village with his ice cream van and courted her with it. They got married within three months and were together all their lives, through Alzheimer's, sacrifices and problems. Do you*

*understand, Franco? My grandfather expressed his love with the ice cream van, and my grandmother, who was as tough as marble but as intelligent as an angel, married him. Full stop. She married him in dialect, she married him with hope in her heart. Because my grand 's dialect had something to say, it had hope.*

Marco's grandmother did not have the 'problem' of educating him, but she educated him more than anyone else because she lived with hope for herself.

The second example is a story that happened recently in Rome. At the Pacinotti Technical Institute, a school in the suburbs, the majority of students are 'difficult'. Don Massimo Granieri teaches religion there. Don Massimo is a great fan of rock music, so much so that he has a programme on Vatican Radio, and in class he often uses the songs he loves to talk to the students. Then he had a great idea: a live broadcast on Vatican Radio from the auditorium of the Pacinotti school, in which the students themselves would suggest the songs they love, explaining to everyone why they are important in their lives. When it was time to start the

broadcast, Don Massimo felt a shiver of terror: 'I'm alone (the teachers preferred to stay outside) with two hundred of the most unruly students, for whom swearing is the most common interjection. What will happen? A miracle happens: for an hour, two hundred students, without teachers to act as watchdogs, remain mesmerised by what is happening on stage, their class-

mates parading in front of them, each introducing a song. Of course, they are not silent: they sing along, applaud, cheer... but always in an orderly manner, and when they need to be quiet, they are quiet. Until the headmistress, intrigued by what she hears, pokes her nose in. And this is what she writes:

*I could never have imagined what I saw and experienced when I walked through the door of the auditorium filled with students from the first to the fifth year. The students listened attentively to the story of one of their classmates who, wearing headphones and a microphone, answered questions naturally and with a touch of emotion. His friends were nearby, slightly to one side, as if to support him and make him feel that at that moment he was the live voice of their thoughts. And then the music started. The children crowding the auditorium sang a song in unison, and I looked at them: they were happy together. The journalists call me for an interview. Without any teacher having to ask for silence, the students listen attentively, nodding when I talk about them, about how it is not always easy to understand them completely. I see their*

<sup>33</sup> Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, commentary by Franco Nembrini, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2023, pp. 348-49.

*almost surprised looks when I say that we should often try harder to understand their reasons. I am amazed by their expressions and the warmth they convey with non-verbal language. I rejoice in thinking how much meaning this crazy experience, this live radio broadcast that gives no one time to create pretence or superstructures, but which reveals itself to be true and alive, is giving to my work and my daily commitment. During the break, many students, instead of running away to the courtyard, stop to talk to me. They want attention, they ask me questions, they listen to my reflections, they ask for advice, they simply introduce themselves. 'A lot of stuff' they would say... Thanks to music and radio, we are on the same wavelength, the harmony between us is almost tangible.*

Why was Don Massimo's attempt successful? Firstly, because he took himself seriously, a passion that gave meaning to his life. Secondly, because he took his students seriously, he valued their abilities to the point of proposing something seemingly crazy like a live radio broadcast. The result was sensational: when an adult who is passionate about reality values his young people (whether they are students or children, it is the same thing), they respond with seriousness, loyalty and enthusiasm.

This is the exact opposite of what is documented in a recent article in the Italian newspaper *Avvenire*:

*During a discussion about school experiences, a third-year h i g h*

*school student, enthusiastic about her encounter with the early philosophers, speaks up: "Those questions about the origin and destiny of everything are also mine, but when I expressed my enthusiasm, the teacher corrected me: for him, it is a scientific study that has nothing to do with me personally." A final-year student replied: "As a member of the youth jury at a film festival, I shared with my peers our appreciation for a film that dealt with the very existential questions you mentioned, but the adults present invited us to focus our attention on other factors instead: acting, editing, photography..." It is striking and painful how often we adults, perhaps driven by the best of intentions (precision in teaching, for example), contribute to extinguishing the fire that burns in the hearts of the young people entrusted to us, rather than rekindling it. Perhaps this is because that fire frightens us, confronting us with uncomfortable existential questions, questions that we think we have 'resolved' and do not want to reopen.<sup>34</sup>*

The last example I would like to give concerns my personal experience. In recent years, with the Centocanti Association, the Diocese of Verona and the Rivela Association, we have organised exhibitions on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, first in Verona and then in over sixty Italian cities and towns. What's new about that, you might say, everyone knows Dante...

There are two new things. The first is that this initiative did not arise from a cultural project, but from the fact that Dante is my life's passion. I discovered that Dante speaks to me at the age of twelve, which is why I decided to study literature and have been a teacher all my life. My former students and all those who attend my lectures now understand this: that Dante speaks to life. He speaks to the lives of his listeners because he speaks to my life, helping us to better understand the drama of each person's life. The idea for the exhibitions came from a desire to offer everyone the positive experience that reading Dante has been for all of us.

The second novelty is the format of these exhibitions: high school students acted as guides.

These students worked with me to delve into Dante's text, to understand what it has to say to everyone's life, and then took the risk of presenting

<sup>34</sup> Matteo Severgnini, 'Who am I?': a question that challenges education, *Avvenire*, 2 November 2025.



# “I remain convinced that the spread of young people’s addiction to smartphones and social media is not a cause but a consequence of our educational failure

what they had discovered in public, in front of dozens of strangers. The result was extraordinary: young people who had mediocre results at school, very shy young people who did not have the courage to open their mouths, discovered that they were worth much more than they thought, rediscovered the joy of studying, rediscovered the sense of their own greatness, the feeling of being made for great things. Because what Serres says, quoted at the beginning, may be true, that young people inhabit a world different from ours<sup>35</sup>. But it is even more true that their hearts are the same as ours. The hearts of young people are made up of a desire for goodness, beauty and truth which, deep down, is identical in all human beings, ‘a centre of gravity that even the craziest education has failed to shift’, as Kafka writes<sup>36</sup>. And when this ‘centre of gravity’ is touched, it lights up. I have received hundreds of testimonies to this effect; here I report those of two young people and a teacher.

*What I found most significant for me was to act as a guide: talking, starting from the Divine Comedy, about the questions it raises for me, and doing so to complete strangers, was a real challenge, one worth facing and overcoming. Let me explain: the Divine Comedy raises big questions, especially for us young people, I think. And they are big questions because they speak directly to my life: they are questions about the meaning of my story, about the wounds of my past, about the evil I can do and about the great*

*desire for Good that lives in me. And I had to talk about all this, about my own affairs, and my most important and profound affairs, not to my best friend, but to people I had never seen before and whom I may never see again in the future. All this, of course, with the fear of being judged for the things I said and, therefore, with the fear that my own life would be judged, in a sense. Yet this fear proved to be unfounded: talking about all this was wonderful, and I saw all the visitors leave with a joy on their faces that you don’t see everywhere, and this was also possible thanks to me. In short: it was worth facing this fear!*

*I remember well the eyes of those young people, one of them in particular. That look keeps me awake at night, it torments me. At first, it seemed to say, ‘My parents are making me waste this afternoon on old people’s stuff’. Suddenly, I saw it change. Suddenly, something happened. And I saw those eyes light up. I had the privilege of witnessing a miracle, and I was in the front row. ‘Assure me that it’s worth it,’ that girl seemed to be saying to me, ‘show me the stars. Don’t tell me about them, don’t explain them to me. Show them to me.’ Those eyes were thirsty for infinity and expected to find a reflection of it in mine. And I had to live up to that. I, Gabriele, a nobody, found myself in the position of having to show her infinity. Not an inch less, just Infinity. Because that was what those eyes were looking for. Not words, not explanations, but a living, real, present experience. And they were looking for it in me, in . Somehow they saw something ‘out of this world’ in me, and I, Gabriele, a nobody, cannot understand it. I had the opportunity to be an instrument of Infinity.*

*The world, society, and we ourselves continue to complain about this generation of slackers, indifferent, apathetic, misfits, and so on. And it’s all true, but there is a but. In fact, through these weeks spent together, with the*

*exhibition and the work on Dante, we have experienced that if a young person meets an adult who is serious about reality and open to questions about their pain, goodness, and mystery, if they meet an adult who is concerned about this, and if this adult, when meeting the young person, treats them with equal seriousness, as a man, not as a child, knowing full well that the questions he faces are the same ones that dwell in the young person’s heart, and gives him confidence and offers him a path in which to get to know each other, to challenge each other, to be together in the face of those questions, to identify a possible path and to start walking it together to see what happens, then what happens is that the person flourishes, that life, school, Dante, an exhibition can once again be interesting even for a student who has failed multiple times at a technical institute, because now he is at the centre of that interest, thanks to a rediscovered tenderness towards himself through the eyes of another. After all, what is the point of teaching if not to help the young people entrusted to us discover their greatness?*

I believe that the words of these young people and this teacher are worth more than a thousand speeches. Education is always possible, even in this age of loneliness and social media, because the questions that lie at the heart of human beings are always the same. There is only one condition: that the educator is a man or woman who is seriously committed to their own existence. A man or woman who takes seriously, to the very core of their being, the desire for goodness, beauty and truth that lies at the bottom of their heart, and who therefore takes seriously the same desire that lies in the hearts of their children, their pupils, the young people entrusted to them. When they feel looked at in this way, children flourish.

One last corollary. No one can play this game alone. The loneliness we mentioned at the beginning does not only devastate the lives of young people: it devastates the lives of adults. “If adults stop helping each other in the care of children,” Haidt notes, “parents find themselves alone. Parenting becomes more difficult, a source of greater fears”<sup>37</sup>. If we want to win today’s educational challenge, we must come together again, build relationships with adults who share our concerns. We must build new “constellations” – to use the word that recurs throughout the Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope* – that bring together parents, schools and educational institutions of all kinds, without fear of differences, but discovering that diversity is not an obstacle but a source of richness. “Constellations” that free us adults from loneliness and fear, and allow us to witness, “in the joy of [our] hearts”<sup>38</sup>, that life is good, that it has a great horizon, and that it is possible for everyone to reach it, whatever material or spiritual misery they may be living in. ▀

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>38</sup> Ambrosian Liturgy, quoted in Luigi Giussani, *Generare tracce nella storia del mondo*, Rizzoli, Milan 2019, p. 205.



**Franco Nembrini**

Teacher, essayist, and pedagogue. He is the author of several books, including the commentaries on *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri.

<sup>35</sup> They no longer have the same global world, they no longer have the same human world’, Michel Serres, *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Franz Kafka, *Diaries - 1910*, in Id., *Confessions and Diaries*, Mondadori, Milan 1972, p. 126.



# MARIO DRAGHI

## Speech to International Press about “The Draghi Report”

Brussels, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Ursula, thank you very much for your kind words at the start of this conversation. But thank you also for giving me the opportunity to serve Europe, which I try to do to the best of my ability. A year ago, we met here to discuss three challenges outlined in the report: the European growth model had been under pressure for some time, dependencies threatened its resilience, and without faster growth, Europe would not be able to realise its ambitions on climate, digital and security, not to mention its ability to finance its ageing social systems. Over the past year, each of these challenges has become even more serious. The foundations of Europe’s growth – expanding global trade and high-value exports – have weakened

further. The United States has imposed the highest tariffs since the Smoot-Hawley Act. China has become an even stronger competitor, both in third markets and, with the diversion of trade flows due to US tariffs, within Europe itself. Since last

**One year on, Europe therefore finds itself in a more difficult position. Our growth model is fading. Vulnerabilities are increasing. And there is no clear path to finance the investments we need.**

December, China’s trade surplus with the EU has increased by almost 20%. We have also seen how Europe’s ability to respond is limited by its dependencies, even when our economic weight is considerable. Dependence on the US for defence has been cited as one of the reasons why we

had to accept a trade agreement largely on American terms. Dependence on critical Chinese materials has limited our ability to prevent Chinese overcapacity from flooding Europe, or to counter its support for Russia.

Europe has begun to react. Since the United States absorbs about three-quarters of the global current account deficit, diversifying away from its market is unrealistic in the short term. But, for example, the Mercosur agreement with Latin America may offer some relief to exporters. The Commission has launched strategic projects for critical raw materials. And defence spending is rising rapidly. However, these defence commitments are in addition to already enormous financing needs. The ECB now estimates that annual investment needs

for the period 2025-2031 amount to almost €1.2 trillion, compared to €800 billion estimated a year ago. The public share has almost doubled, from 24% to 43%, with over €510 billion more per year, as defence is mainly financed from public funds. Fiscal space is scarce. Even without this new expenditure, EU public debt is set to grow by 10 percentage points over the next decade, reaching 93% of GDP, based on growth assumptions that are more optimistic than the current reality. One year on, Europe therefore finds itself in a more difficult position. Our growth model is fading. Vulnerabilities are increasing. And there is no clear path to finance the investments we need. And we have been painfully reminded that inaction threatens not only our competitiveness but our very sovereignty.

The report identified three priorities for Europe: closing the innovation gap in advanced technologies; charting a path to decarbonisation that supports growth; and strengthening economic security. As President von der Leyen pointed out, these priorities are also at the heart of the Commission's agenda. I welcome her decision to put competitiveness at the centre, and the programme is ambitious. European citizens and businesses appreciate the diagnosis, the clear priorities and the action plans. But they also express growing frustration. They are disappointed by the slow pace of the EU. They see us as unable to keep up with the speed of change elsewhere. They are ready to act, but fear that governments have not

grasped the gravity of the moment. Too often, excuses are made for our slowness. We say that this is simply the way the EU is built. That a complex process involving many actors must be respected. Sometimes inertia is even presented as respect for the rule of law. I believe this is a form of complacency. Competitors in the United States and China are much less constrained, even when acting within the law. Continuing as usual means resigning ourselves to falling behind. A different path requires new speed, scale and intensity. It means acting together, not fragmenting our

**Removing barriers to the scalability of new technologies. A true '28th regime' must become a reality, allowing innovative companies to operate, trade and raise finance without hindrance across all 27 Member States, just as is the case in other major economies.**

efforts. It means concentrating resources where the impact is greatest. And it means delivering results in months, not years.

Let's start with technology. AI is often described as a 'transformative' technology, like electricity 140 years ago. But it depends on the coordination of at least four other technologies: the cloud, to store huge amounts of data; supercomputing, to process that data; cyber security, to protect sensitive sectors; and advanced networks – 5G, fibre and satellites – for transmission. In some areas, Europe is showing progress. Plans are underway for at least five AI gigafactories, each with

over 100,000 advanced GPUs. Data centre capacity is set to triple over the next seven years. A major telecommunications reform is expected by the end of the year. ASML's recent investment in Mistral is a promising sign for the domestic AI ecosystem. Adoption levels are also growing: the EIB notes that European companies are adopting advanced technologies at a rate close to that of their US competitors, albeit from a lower base. But the gaps are clear. On the AI frontier, the US produced 40 large foundation models last year, China 15 and the EU only 3. Among SMEs, AI adoption is still low—between 13% and 21%. And in the most strategic field—AI based on European intellectual property to anchor our key industries—progress is minimal.

There are three areas where greater ambition is needed:

First: removing barriers to the scalability of new technologies. A true '28th regime' must become a reality, allowing innovative companies to operate, trade and raise finance without hindrance across all 27 Member States, just as is the case in other major economies. This is particularly important to give young Europeans a chance on their own continent: they want to stay here, they don't want to have to go elsewhere to succeed. The Commission is moving in this direction. But with uncertain support from Member States, the first step will probably be limited to a digital identity for businesses. Early-stage funding also needs stronger support. The Scaleup Europe Fund can help start-ups grow—if its size

is adequate for their financial needs. The planned increase in Horizon Europe to €175 billion is positive. But for disruptive research, it will be insufficient unless the additional resources are concentrated in priority programmes of significant size. Resources must flow to centres of excellence. They must focus on high-risk, high-return projects, selected through a DARPA-style process. They must be reinforced by strong links between industry and aca-

law but also the heavy additions by Member States. Training AI models requires enormous amounts of public data from the web. However, legal uncertainty about its use creates costly delays, slowing down deployment in Europe. Research confirms this: the GDPR has increased the cost of data by around 20% for EU companies compared to their US competitors. Yet the only change on the table so far is a relaxation of record-keeping requirements and the exten-

concerns high-risk AI systems in areas such as critical infrastructure and healthcare, must be proportionate and support innovation and development. In my view, implementation of this phase should be suspended until we better understand the downsides. More generally, enforcement should be based on ex-post assessment, judging models on their actual capabilities and demonstrated risks.

The third area is the vertical integration of AI into in-



demic institutions to transform research into real-world applications. Implementation must be entrusted to experienced project managers—not bureaucrats. And Europe should be able to make direct investments in a few large strategic deep tech initiatives.

The second area is regulation. Among European businesses, one of the clearest demands is for a radical simplification of the GDPR—not just the primary

sion of exemptions for SMEs to mid-cap companies. A broader reform towards simple, harmonised rules is still vague. The AI Act is another source of uncertainty. The first rules, which included a ban on 'unacceptable risk' systems, were introduced without much fuss. Codes of conduct signed by most major developers, together with the Commission's August guidelines, have clarified responsibilities. But the next phase, which

industry. Sectoral applications of AI are even more critical than pure computing power. Here, Europe has a real advantage: its companies hold more than half of the global market for industrial automation solutions, a cornerstone of industrial AI. However, only about 10% of manufacturing companies used AI last year. Industry and governments must work together to turn this advantage into proprietary European solutions.

The Commission's 'Apply AI' strategy, due this autumn, will be a crucial test bed. Natural gas prices in the EU are still almost four times higher than in the United States. Industrial electricity prices are on average more than double. If this gap does not narrow, the transition to a high-tech economy will stall. Energy is as critical as technology for the development of AI. Electricity demand from data centres in Europe will increase by 70% by 2030. Energy already accounts for up to 40% of their operating costs. The IEA warns that, without intervention, one in five projects globally could be delayed due to bottlenecks in the networks.[9] Only countries that align their energy strategy with digital policy will reap the greatest benefits in the AI race.

The Commission has launched the Clean Industrial Deal and the Affordable Energy Action Plan, both of which are consistent with the report's agenda. But the main step so far has been to relax state aid rules to allow Member States to subsidise prices. This may offer temporary relief. However, it does not address the structural reasons why energy in Europe is so expensive. These reasons include gas prices, which, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are still around twice their pre-Covid levels; a pricing system in which gas continues to determine the price of electricity most of the time, even with the expansion of renewables; and high levies and taxes. Decarbonisation is the best long-term path for Europe to achieve energy independence despite its lack of natural resources. But it requires much faster investment to make a renewable-based system work:

in grids, interconnectors and clean baseload generation such as nuclear. Today, half of the cross-border capacity needed by 2030 has no investment plan. Even approved projects take more than ten years, with half the time lost to authorisations. The Networks Package planned for the end of this year and the proposed budget increase for cross-border connections are steps forward. But the current system, based on national coordination of permits and funding, is not suited to a European energy market. Cross-border projects need EU-level planning and execution.

At the same time, we must be realistic: these measures will not reduce energy prices quickly. That is why we must act on the levers that can offer faster relief. Two stand out: improving the functioning of gas markets and loosening the link between gas and electricity prices. Europe is already the world's largest buyer of US LNG and has committed to purchasing up to \$750 billion worth of energy products from the US. Whatever the terms of that agreement, it should be treated as an opportunity to reorganise the way we source our gas. Since March, LNG landed in Europe has cost 60% to 90% more than the same gas in the US, even taking into account logistics and regasification costs. Collective EU purchases, as proposed by the Commission after the Russian invasion, could reduce this gap by strengthening our bargaining power, reducing intermediaries' margins and protecting us from spot market volatility. At the same time, Europe must continue the work of the Gas Market Task Force and increase transparency in energy trading. The profits of the four largest global

traders quadrupled between 2020 and 2022. Joint supervision and stricter rules are long overdue. We must also decouple the remuneration of renewables and nuclear power from fossil fuel generation by expanding long-term contracts: I am referring in particular to Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) and Contracts for Difference (CfDs). Some useful initiatives are underway, such as the EIB's pilot project for PPA guaranties. But much more decisive action is needed: long-term contracts must be extended to all renewables and nuclear plants, both new (as is already the case today) and existing. The current price formation mechanism assigns rents to many vested interests.

As we press ahead with decarbonisation, the transition must also be flexible and pragmatic. The Commission has relaxed some of the more burdensome reporting requirements through the Sustainability Omnibus. But in some sectors, such as the automotive sector, the targets are based on assumptions that are no longer valid. The 2035 deadline for zero tailpipe emissions was intended to trigger a virtuous circle: clear targets would stimulate investment in charging infrastructure, expand the internal market, spur innovation in Europe and make electric models more affordable. It was expected that adjacent industries (batteries, semiconductors) would develop in parallel, supported by targeted industrial policies. But this has not happened. The installation of charging points needs to accelerate 3-4 times over the next five years to achieve adequate coverage. The electric vehicle market has grown more slowly than expected.

**“ In essence, the more we push for reforms – and this is a point I have raised repeatedly in the past – the more private capital will step in, and the less public money will be needed.**

European innovation has lagged behind, models remain expensive and supply chain policy is fragmented.

In fact, Europe's fleet of 250 million vehicles is ageing, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have barely fallen in recent years. In this context, sticking rigidly to the 2035 target may prove unachievable—and risks handing market share to others, notably China. As suggested in the report, the upcoming revision of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions regulation should follow a technology-neutral approach and take stock of market and technological developments. An integrated approach to scaling up electric vehicles is also needed, covering supply chains, infrastructure needs and the potential of zero-carbon fuels. In the coming months, the automotive sector will test Europe's ability to align regulation, infrastructure and supply chain development in a coherent

strategy for an industry that, let us not forget, employs over 13 million people across the entire value chain. The report called for the active use of industrial policy to reduce dependencies and defend against state-supported competition. At the time, concerns were raised about economic nationalism, protectionism and the risk that Europe might abandon global rules. But the last year has clearly shown that we are operating in a different world. The line between economics and security is increasingly blurred. States are using every tool at their disposal to promote their own interests. So far, the European response has fallen into two traps: uncoordinated national efforts, or blind faith that market forces will build new sectors. The former can never guarantee the necessary scale. The latter is impossible when others distort markets and tilt the playing

field. Instead, we must build the capacity to defend ourselves and resist pressure at key bottlenecks: defence, heavy industry and technologies that will shape the future. Three levers can give us the necessary scale and intensity:

The first is a new approach to coordinating state aid. In practice, state aid often acts as protectionism, locking activity within borders instead of building globally competitive European industries. IMF research shows that aid in one country often comes at the expense of growth in neighbouring countries. Europe has coordination tools, such as Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs), that can concentrate support and reduce these side effects. Yet in 2023, EU countries spent nearly €190 billion on state aid, five times more than has been allocated to IPCEIs since 2018. Used strategically, IPCEIs could help Europe achieve scale in areas such as innovative nuclear technologies (e.g. small modular reactors) or in the automotive supply chain for affordable zero- and low-emission vehicles. The Commission is taking steps to make such projects more attractive and accessible. But the IPCEI model is still essentially national in its design and financing. This creates an inherent limitation compared to our competitors. Take the European IPCEI on semiconductors approved in 2023: it mobilises €8 billion in public funds, distributed among 14 Member States, 68 projects and 56 companies. The overall objective – to achieve a 20% share of global semiconductor production by 2030 – has already been described by the European Court of Auditors as 'highly unlikely'. In comparison,

Japan, with Rapidus, is taking a different approach: created in 2022, it is channelling £12 billion in public support, despite its smaller economy, towards a single major leader in advanced chips. It is focused on a clear goal, backed by large companies as investors and reference customers. And it is moving much faster, aiming for mass production by 2027. Europe should learn from this concentrated model and extend it to other advanced technologies—combining public and private investment for disruptive innovation and large-scale industrial projects.

The second lever is public procurement. State aid cannot build new supply of critical technologies without corresponding European demand. Regulation can help by removing barriers to adoption, but procurement is the most powerful tool for creating markets. This works in two ways. First, with public procurement accounting for 16% of the EU's GDP, allocating even a small share to European industries would create stable demand for innovation and strengthen strategic sectors. Second, in sectors where scale is a decisive factor, harmonised rules can drive standardisation and support long, capital-intensive investment cycles. The potential is clear in many sectors: reserving an EU quota in procurement for defence chips; supporting the European cloud and vertical AI; or setting quotas for clean-tech products such as green steel and aluminium. Work has begun on preferential rules for public procurement at EU level, although the details are still uncertain. But success will depend on harmonisation among Member States. Without it, procurement, like state aid, risks slipping into national



protectionism and failing to deliver the necessary scale.

The third lever is competition policy. Here, I will essentially repeat what the President has already said. In defence and space, and in the dual-use technologies that support them, market dynamics are very different from consumer markets. Here, consolidation is not necessarily a threat to consumers. It can be a way to reduce duplication of R&D, lower costs, accelerate innovation and concentrate procurement budgets. Competitors in the United States and Asia benefit not only from state support and large procurement markets, but also from consolidation in these sectors. Europe, on the other hand, remains divided between multiple national champions and overlapping industrial bases. Europe should be able to protect competition while promoting consolidation and innovation. A review of merger guidelines is underway, but industry cannot wait until 2027 – this deadline, incidentally, is consistent with the procedure initially chosen. Resilience and innovation must be integrated into competition policy now. At a minimum, a fast-track process should be established immediately.

The next question is: how can speed be increased? In some areas, the EU can do more with the powers it already has. Regulation is the area where the Union can act most quickly and decisively. Europe has long defined itself as a regulatory powerhouse; now it must prove that it can adapt to a rapidly changing technological landscape. In other areas, deeper reforms

are needed: of competences, decision-making processes and funding. Ultimately, in some crucial areas, Europe must start acting less like a confederation and more like a federation. But such reforms will take time, time we may not have. In the meantime, progress may depend on coalitions of willing states, through mechanisms such as enhanced cooperation. Even without treaty changes, Europe could already go much further by concentrating projects and pooling resources.

If we can focus our efforts in this way, the logical next step

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will be to consider joint debt for joint projects, either at the EU level or among a coalition of Member States, to amplify the benefits of coordination. Joint issuance would not magically expand fiscal space. But it would allow Europe to finance larger projects in areas that increase productivity – disruptive innovation, scale technologies, defence R&D or energy networks – where fragmented national spending can no longer suffice. By increasing output faster than interest costs, such projects would gradually restore fiscal space and make it easier to finance broader investment needs. The report estimated that even a modest 2% increase

in total factor productivity over a decade could reduce the burden on public finances by a third. And if we break down barriers in the single market and allow businesses to grow faster, we will also accelerate the development of European capital markets. These can help finance the private share of investment needs.

In essence, the more we push for reforms – and this is a point I have raised repeatedly in the past – the more private capital will step in, and the less public money will be needed. Of course, this path will break long-standing taboos. But the rest of the world has already broken theirs. For Europe to survive, we must do what has never been done before and refuse to be held back by self-imposed limits. Above all, we must move beyond general strategies and delayed timelines. We need concrete dates and measurable results, and we must be

held accountable for them. The deadlines must be ambitious enough to require real focus and collective effort. This has been the formula behind Europe's most successful projects, the Single Market and the euro. Both have progressed through clear stages, firm milestones and constant political commitment. I will conclude on the same note as Ursula: European citizens are asking their leaders to look towards our common European destiny and understand the scale of the challenge. Only unity, a d purpose and an urgent response will show that they are ready to face extraordinary times with extraordinary actions. ▸



# EUROPE'S VOCATION, MISSION, AND ROLE

## in the Post-Historical West

Zdzisław Krasnodębski

Until 1989, it was fairly easy to identify where the border of the “West” lay. The West began west of the Elbe, with a small exclave in West Berlin. On one side was the world of democracy, the free market economy, personal freedoms and prosperity; on the other, the world of communism, a planned economy with ever-increasing shortages, oppression, forced atheisation and the fight against Christianity, and before the 1953 mass crimes. This division ran through the middle of Europe. My generation, born after the Second World War and growing up in communist Poland, dreamed not only of a short trip to the “West”, but also of the “return to Europe” of our countries, even though, nominally, in a geographical sense, we had never left. At that time, from 1945 to 1989, only part of Europe in the geographical sense was the “West” in the political sense. And in our opinion, this was the “real Europe” – the part of Europe that was liberated in 1944/1945 by the Western Allies, and in fact by the Americans. The “East” stretched from the Elbe to Kamchatka. The part of Europe occupied by the Red Army was no longer “Europe” but a different civilisation.

**Geography cannot answer the question of what Europe is and what the West is. The boundaries are fluid. The origins of European culture developed in the Mediterranean basin, and therefore also in North Africa. And where does Europe end in the east?**

In the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of “Mitteleuropa”, Central Europe, was revived as a forgotten region of Europe, unfortunately occupied by this other, non-European Eastern civilisation. This was the result of new freedom movements and trends that emerged at that time: KOR, Charter 77, Solidarity. The Nobel Prize awarded to Czesław Miłosz and Milan Kundera’s famous essay on a divided Europe, published in the “New Yorker Review of Books”, also contributed to this. The countries of Central Europe, wanting to “return to Europe”, wanted to become part of the “West” in the sense of the time. Milan Kundera wrote: “In fact, what does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole? For a thousand years their nations have belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every period of its history. For them, the word ‘Europe’ does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word ‘West’.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the two concepts were considered synonymous.

<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe* *New York Review of Books* Volume 31, Number 7, 26 April 1984



Just before the fall of communism, Central Europe became fashionable, even snobbishly. At that time, any self-respecting Western intellectual who did not want to be considered provincial had to visit Prague, Krakow or Budapest. This recognition reached its peak in 1989, when the process of the collapse of communism began. The contribution of Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and other nations to the unification of the continent was appreciated. Today, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and other Central European nations are already part of “Europe”; they are also part of the West, members of the European Union and NATO. But have we returned to the Europe we wanted to return to? What is “the West” today?

The West is no longer perceived as completely uniform in political terms, as it was during the Cold War – there is increasing talk of political differences between Europe and the United States. And yet it was the US that ensured – and still ensures – Europe’s security. The US was the leader of the Western world. Back in the late 1990s, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote and said that Europe was a protectorate of the US. A significant rift appeared during the American intervention in Iraq. At that time, two left-wing intellectuals, Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, announced the birth (or perhaps the rebirth) of Europe and the division of the West – Europe was to emancipate itself from American influence and remember its uniqueness. And although relations improved afterwards, the differences with North America are now being emphasised again. Following the European media, one can see that Donald Trump is mentioned as a problem for Europe just as often as Vladimir Putin. Europe is to become a different and more sovereign entity vis-à-vis the US and is increasingly identified with the European Union. A pro-European is someone who advocates further integration and does not criticise the actions of EU institutions.

So what is Europe? What is the West? We know that both concepts have changed their meanings throughout history. They carry normative connotations. They also function differently in the narratives of different European nations, sometimes appearing with similar meanings but different connotations: “-West”, “der Westen”, “l’Ouest” and “l’Ovest” carry different meanings than “Abendland”, “Occident”, “l’Occident” and “l’Occidente”.<sup>2</sup>

Let us recall that at the very beginning, the “West” was only Greece, which in the first half of the 5th century BC defined its identity in opposition to the Persian Empire. It was an opposition between the Greeks and the “barbarians”, the West (dysmaí or hespéra) and the East (anatolé), the Occident and the Orient. Later, in the Middle Ages, the West was synonymous with the area of the Western Church, Latin as opposed to Orthodox Christianity, Greek, from Byzantine Europe. The concept of the West, encompassing Europe and North America, began to be used more widely only at the end of the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> For example, in his philosophy of history, Hegel still excluded the “new world”, i.e. America, from history, from the march of the absolute spirit. He believed that this new world had not yet made its mark on history, and therefore could be ignored. According to him, the “old world” consisted of three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. However, Africa was, in his view, a blank page in history, irrelevant from the point of view of the philosophy of history. So only Asia and Europe remained – Morgenland, the land of beginnings and the past, and Abendland, to which the present belonged, where the absolute spirit was coming to self-awareness.

Geography cannot answer the question of what Europe is and what the West is. The boundaries are fluid. The origins of European culture developed in the Mediterranean basin, and therefore also in North Africa. And where does Europe end in the east? The contemporary school answer is that it ends in the Urals

<sup>2</sup> Jasper M. Trautsch, “Der Westen,” *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 2018/2019, Vol. 60/61 (2018/2019), pp. 409-440

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Heinrich August Winkler *Geschichte des Westens: Von den Anfängen in der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, München 2009

**“To this day, there is still a debate as to whether Christianity’s adoption of Greek philosophical concepts distorted its essence, as critics of the “Hellenisation” of Christianity claim.**

and the Caucasus. But this is an arbitrarily established border. It was not until the 18th century that the Urals were recognised as the geographical border of Europe, when Russia grew in strength after the reforms of Peter I and began its “Drang nach Westen”.

Is Russia a European country, then? The question of Russia’s belonging to Europe is controversial and complex. Undoubtedly, there was a class of Europeanised people in Russia who created works important for European culture. From the 18th century onwards, Russia participated as a power in European politics, etc. Therefore, when Mikhail Gorbachev spoke in the 1990s about a common European home, many politicians and intellectuals took it at face value. The closer a nation was to Russia, the more it doubted its European identity. Intellectuals from Central and Eastern Europe, including Kundera, saw Russia as a country different from Europe, as a different civilisation. In this regard, the position of the eminent Polish historian Oskar Halecki is interesting. On the one hand, he emphasised that part of Russia is indeed part of Europe, namely Eastern Europe, but he also shared the view that Russia is culturally distinct.<sup>4</sup> In Central Europe, communism was seen as a result of Russian history, not as a break with its continuity. Kundera asked: “Is communism the negation of Russian history or its fulfilment? And he answered: “Certainly it is both its negation (the negation, for example, of its religiosity) and its fulfilment (the fulfilment of its centralising tendencies and its imperial dreams).”

Today’s Russia combines the legacy of tsarism and communism. In Western Europe, there is no longer any tendency to talk about Russia as part of Europe. Its cultural alienation has become apparent even to its former admirers in France, Italy and Germany. The brutal aggression against Ukraine and the crimes committed have brought to mind those features of Russian civilisation that Europe did not want to remember, which Poles were already talking and writing about in the 19th century, such as Adam Mickiewicz in his Paris lectures and Zygmunt Krasiński in his political writings. Currently, “Western” scholars – Slavists, historians, political scientists – are examining their consciences and hastily revising their views on Russia. German specialists are discovering their Russophilia and deliberating on the cultural causes of Russian aggression.<sup>5</sup> Professor Ewa Thompson, author of a well-known book on imperialist ideology in Russian literature, has proposed the decolonisation of Slavic studies

<sup>4</sup> Oskar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History*, London and New York 1950

<sup>5</sup> Martin Schulze Wessel, *Putin ist kein Betriebsunfall der russischen Geschichte*, FAZ 01.05.2023; Thomas Thiel, *Osteuropa-Geschichte. Milde Blicke aufs Imperium*, FAZ 26. 03.2023

in the United States: “Why should such a process take place? First, because the current situation does not reflect the real weight and importance of literary and cultural activity in non-Germanic Central Europe and in Eastern Europe. The war in Ukraine began to tear down the curtain that obscured a world of which American and European students of Slavic studies had no idea. Second, because the war in Ukraine is rearranging the relative political weight of non-Germanic Central Europe and Eastern Europe. Yes, I do recognise the importance of nuclear ICBMs in Russia’s possession, but I also recognise the realities of Ukrainian courage and willingness to sacrifice for the preservation of Ukrainian identity. I also recognise the richness of the intellectual landscape in places that until now have been dismissed as “Eastern Europe”.<sup>6</sup>

### Christian Europe

If it is impossible to define either Europe or the West solely in geographical terms, can it be done by referring to its spirit, its culture? Despite all its historical variability, we must assume that something must connect all meanings of Europe and the West, otherwise we would not use the same words or concepts.

How can we characterise this civilisation, this culture that we call European or Western? The standard answer is that Europe is founded on the heritage of Greek philosophy, Roman law and Christianity – symbolised by three cities – Athens, Jerusalem and Rome. However, the cultural content denoted by these places never formed a harmonious whole from the outset. Tertullian, who is considered the father of Latin Christianity, asked: “What does Athens have in common with Jerusalem? What does the academy have in common with the church? What do heretics have in common with Christians? Our teaching comes from Solomon’s vestibule, who himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” To this day, there is still a debate as to whether Christianity’s adoption of Greek philosophical concepts distorted its essence, as critics of the “Hellenisation” of Christianity claim.<sup>7</sup> The Catholic Church has always defended this synthesis of metaphysics and faith, although it emphasised that the truths of faith transcend reason. Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, emphasised in a negative reference to Nietzsche that “Christianity is not Platonism for the people”. Rome and Jerusalem were also fundamentally opposed at the beginning. After all, according to Gibbon, Christianity was one of the factors

<sup>6</sup> On Decolonising Slavic Studies in Europe and America <https://deliberatio.eu/en/analyses/on-decolonizing-slavic-studies-in-europe-and-america>

<sup>7</sup> Georg Essen, *Hellenisation of Christianity? On the Problematics and Overcoming of a Polarising Interpretative Figure*, in: *Theology and Philosophy* 87 (2012), 1–17.

in the fall of the Roman Empire. However, the Church took over the foundations of Rome's political structure in a different form and continued, as Hannah Arendt wrote, the Roman triad of religion, authority and tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Our tradition is a constant dialogue, sometimes a struggle between these elements. And this was the source of its dynamism. Yet this simple formula of three cities overlooks the fact that Christianity, which absorbed elements of Greek philosophy and Roman state culture, was by far the most important factor in the emergence of European civilisation. At first, Christianity did not cover the entire geographical area we call Europe, nor was it limited to it alone. Over time, however, it acquired territorial significance – it came to mean the part of the world inhabited by Christians who belonged to the Roman Church.<sup>9</sup> The “Latin civilisation”<sup>10</sup> known as “Christanitas”, Western Latin Christianity, that took shape in the north-western part of geographical Europe also encompassed Central and Eastern Europe in the 10th century, which was mainly inhabited by Slavic peoples. However, since the Reformation, Western Christianity has ceased to be a unified entity, which is why some historians believe that Christian civilisation ended between 1517 and 1648.<sup>11</sup> A well-known German historian of the Middle Ages summarises this story as follows: “For a long time, Europe was more or less identical with the Catholic Church, in contrast to the Orthodox Church, Greek Christianity or, as Luther said, the ‘Orient’. But since Luther's time, this distinction no longer really applies, because Western Christianity was largely no longer Catholic and Eastern Christianity was largely becoming Turkish at that time.”<sup>12</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the concept of Europe became popular as political expression and was used for self-identification. “For the last time Christendom served as the symbol of supreme loyalty when the ‘hereditary enemy of the Christian name’ drove the ‘Christian forces’ out of Hungary and appeals went forth for aid in the ‘bellum sacrum in rem Christianam.’”<sup>13</sup> Since

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, New York 2006, p. 127

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonisation and Cultural Change, 950–1350*, Harmondsworth 1994, pp. 252–255.

<sup>10</sup> Rémie Brague *Europe, la voie romaine*, Paris 1992

<sup>11</sup> Mark Greengrass, *Christendom Destroyed. Europe 1517–1649*, London 2014,

<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand Seibt, *The Founding of Europe: An Interim Report on the Last Thousand Years*, Frankfurt am Main, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> H. D. Schmidt, *The Establishment of ‘Europe’ As a Political Expression*, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1966), pp. 172–178



the 19th century, the history of Europe has been presented as a history of departure from Christianity – first liberation from the power of the Church in the Reformation, then from Christianity in general, until the present day, when Christianity is one of many religions, not without influence in political and social life. The history of Europe is a history of progressive secularisation, leading to today's “post-Christian” Europe. To this day, the history of Europe taught at American universities is very often limited to the history of certain European countries – Great Britain, Germany and France. In this narrative, which currently dominates the EU, the proper history of Europe begins with the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. This is the pattern used to present the history of Europe, for example at the House of European History in Brussels.

Europe is to be united by general principles, not by its particular history and unique traditions. It is to be based on the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. These values are interpreted by liberal-left circles. Contemporary Western culture, shaped after the fall of communism as a political system, is based on the idea of a completely free individual. Free choice and “self-realisation” a human being are the guiding principles of contemporary Europe. As Max Scheler once rightly stated, this is not only a break with the history of Europe to date, but an experiment unknown to humanity.

What is the place of Christianity in this civilisation? In a way Christianity contributed to its creation. Contemporary humanitarianism is a mutation, a distortion of it, reminiscent of what the Young Hegelians and French philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude-Henri de Saint Simon with his project of new Christianity, and August Comte with his religion of humanity, wanted. This is pseudo-Christianity, which dispenses not only with the old dogmas, but also with God. God has become completely human. Just as monotheism was once the bridge connecting Christianity with philosophy, anthropology is now becoming the link with contemporary humanitarianism, the public philosophy of liberal democracy – the incarnation and figure of Jesus not as the Son of God, Christ, but as an exceptionally good man, as one of the prophets, as a teacher who shows us how to live. Faith has become a private matter in Europe. There are many religions in our societies, tolerating each other and engaging in polemics. Admittedly, religious

fundamentalists have appeared in this post-Christian Europe, but they are followers of Islam, and only they are prepared to kill and die for their faith. Optimists believe that the “Europeanisation” of Islam is possible, that it will undergo the same evolution as Christianity. Contemporary Christianity also proclaims that everything has already been accomplished, that humanity has already been saved and redeemed. There will be no other salvation than that which is taking place in the world, in perfect liberal democracy, in the European Union. Only a few live in expectation of another, true salvation – the second coming of Christ – and their own salvation or damnation after death.

The philosophical traditions of metaphysics were also rejected in the 20th century. Philosophy became a specialised academic discipline that satisfies certain intellectual interests, whims or needs. It does not formulate definitive answers to questions, but most often questions their validity, considering them to be the

result of linguistic complexities and misunderstandings of grammar. In John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, we read: “With a false modesty, people rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence. In short, the hope that philosophy might be able to provide definitive answers

to these questions has dwindled.” The time for synthesising the philosophy of the great metaphysical tradition of Greece and Christianity has passed; Benedict XVI admits that the relationship between philosophy and faith needs to be redefined. In a conversation with Habermas, he spoke of pathology in religion and pathology in reason, and of the need for correlation between reason and faith, which need each other, heal each other and purify each other.<sup>14</sup> Faith has been abandoned by philosophy.<sup>15</sup> But without reference to reason, Christianity will lose its power and its universality. The separation of theology from philosophy, of faith from reason, leads to Christianity losing its demythologising role and philosophy becoming trivial.

<sup>14</sup> J. Habermas, J. Ratzinger, *Dialectic of Secularisation. On Reason and Religion*, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna 2006. pp. 56–57.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith and Philosophy*, in: *The God of Faith and the God of the Philosophers*, pp. 193–204, quote p. 193.

**The history of Europe is a history of progressive secularisation, leading to today's “post-Christian” Europe. To this day, the history of Europe taught at American universities is very often limited to the history of certain European countries – Great Britain, Germany and France.**

## An anti-national union

Contemporary Europe is not only turning away from its Christian heritage, but also, in its pursuit of uniformity, undermining another essential feature of our civilisation – its political and national pluralism. Europe has never been a single state or empire, despite attempts to rebuild the Roman Empire, the idea of *renovatio imperii*. Napoleon Bonaparte ruled almost all of Europe only for a short time. Hitler also attempted to unite Europe in the fight against decadence, Bolshevism and ‘plutocracy’. As Michael Burleigh writes: “The Nazi plans for Europe included realistic plans for the effective economic exploitation of the continent, turgid jurisprudential tracts outlining a European ‘Monroe Doctrine’; works of pseudo-history extolling ahistorical versions of the medieval Holy Roman Empire; and quasi-ethnographic attempts to destroy existing nation states in favour of a patchwork quilt of subatomic regional particles.”<sup>16</sup>

Attempts to unify Europe by force have never succeeded. However, there has almost always been some form of looser European unity, a broader European political order – *Respublica Christiana*, which later took the form of an awareness of a community of Christian states. There were also family

ties between royal and aristocratic families. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Holy Alliance was formed, and a little later there was talk of a pentarchy - five European powers agreed on the principles of political order on the continent. After the First World War, the political order in Europe was to take into account the principle of self-determination of nations. In Western Europe, the sovereignty of nation states was limited by American dominance, while in Central Europe, which was controlled by the Soviet Union, it was largely a fiction.

European integration was intended to prevent conflicts between nations, but initially it was not directed against nation states. On the contrary, as Alain Milward proved in his well-known book, it was European integration that saved and strengthened European nation states, which in the 1930s were experiencing a great crisis and were shaken by social

and political conflicts.<sup>17</sup> The subsequent steps towards European integration did not result from the ideology and political actions of federalists, but, as Andrew Moravcsik showed, were the result of bargaining between Member States.<sup>18</sup>

The European Union was intended to be a union of states that did not allow for a strict hierarchy among European nations. This equality was expressed in the principle that the most important decisions were taken unanimously, that each state was represented by a commissioner, etc. Even in the 1990s, Europe’s cultural and political diversity was constantly emphasised. European integration was supposed to enable the development of this diversity, not be the end of it. Small and large states, small and large nations could count on equal participation in the European community. According to the eminent German historian Klaus Zernack, this equality between small and large nations is a distinctive feature that defines Europe.<sup>19</sup>

**Unity must be developed not against European nations, but between them. The European Union requires a thorough restructuring, which should consist in clarifying and limiting its competences, and in renewing national and Christian traditions.**

According to Kundera, one of the most important differences between Central Europe and Russia was precisely this diversity: “nothing could be more foreign to Central Europe and its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardising, centralising, determined to transform every nation of its empire (Ukrainians, Belorussians, Armenians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and

others) into a single Russian people (or, as is more commonly expressed in this age of generalised verbal mystification, into a ‘single Soviet people’). In addition to political equality, cultural equality was also emphasised, which is why all EU documents are still translated into national languages today.

The 1990s were not only years of defeat and retreat for the Marxist left, which had dominated intellectual life in Western Europe since 1968 in previous decades, but also a true “new spring of nations”. In 1989 and the following years, supranational entities such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia collapsed, and even very small nations regained their freedom. Contrary to the dogmas of the

<sup>17</sup> Alain Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, London 1992

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Moravcsik *The Choice for Europe*, London and New York 1998

<sup>19</sup> Klaus Zernack, *On the Problem of National Identity in Eastern Central Europe*, in: Helmuth Berding (ed.) *National Consciousness and Collective Identity 2*, Frankfurt am Main, p. 178

<sup>16</sup> Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History*, London 2000, p. 428.

German left, Germany was reunified, or more precisely, the GDR joined the Federal Republic of Germany and was absorbed by it. The sense of national unity overcame the barriers of communist indoctrination, which seemed particularly effective in the case of the GDR. All this contradicted the common, dominant philosophy of history, which said that only supranational political entities – unions and federations – had a future. Progressive intellectuals watched with surprise as long-forgotten countries and nations such as Georgia, Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus, Montenegro and Ukraine reappeared on the map. It was patriotism that defeated communism. Communism in Europe was overthrown as a result of resistance by the “backward” nations of Central and Eastern Europe against the progressive, universalist ideology of Marxism, which was taught with zeal and fervour at many “Western” universities.

However, there was great concern as to whether all these mostly small and poor countries, with difficult pasts and often disputed borders, would be able to bear the burden of independence, or whether new ethnic and national conflicts would erupt. The war in the disintegrating Yugoslavia confirmed these fears. Even then, people consoled themselves with the thought that this was only a temporary paroxysm of separatism, resulting from the negative experiences of unions and federations based on coercion. Soon, the European nations were to find themselves in a different political entity, but this time based on completely different principles, respecting their rights and freedoms. Closer integration, followed by its extension to countries outside the former Iron Curtain, was to create a European order, prevent conflicts and restore stability. The idea of a “post-national Europe” began to be promoted, with the diversity of regions and cities as the preferred type of diversity.

Today, according to the dominant philosophy of history, “nationalism” is responsible for all of Europe’s misfortunes, understood not as fanatical chauvinism, but broadly as a sense of national belonging, thinking in terms of nations and their rights. Indeed, there was no shortage of national conflicts in Europe. But wars, massacres and slaughter also occurred in other eras, when the dominant form of political organisation in Europe was not the nation state. And the First World War, as the Germans write, “Urkatastrophe”, was not a conflict between nation states, the result of Serbian nationalism and other ambitions of “small” nations, but imperial rivalry.

The thesis that its alleged second act – World War II – was the result of “Wilsonism” – the idea of basing the political order in Europe on the nation state – is also more than questionable. The political order of Europe established at Versailles proved to be short-lived, but it collapsed not because of the nationalism of small nations, but because of the resentment, revisionism and aggression of the defeated imperial nations – the Germans and Russians. Their aggression was justified and motivated by a supranational ideology. National Socialism and communism were not simply forms of nationalism. Communism was an internationalist ideology that preached the unity of the global proletariat. National Socialism appealed to the solidarity of the “master race” and it was no coincidence that it found many supporters and collaborators outside Germany as well. It was undoubtedly a pan-European movement. Both the National Socialists and the Communists murdered “nationalists” in Poland and other European countries who were attached to their homeland and the principle of self-determination of nations.

Today, the Union is once again being built as an alternative to the nation state. Supporters of further integration would like to reduce the role of Member States by transferring some of their powers to the European Council. The principle of unanimity in the Council of the European Union is increasingly being restricted. There are proposals to abolish it altogether, to introduce transnational lists for elections to the European Parliament, etc. Supporters of “Europeanisation” want Europe as a continent to become a single political space.



The EU has been extremely liberal and generous in its immigration policy, keeping its borders wide open until recently. This was linked to the promotion of multiculturalism as a model of social life. Both internal and external immigration allows for the dilution of overly strong national – nationalistic – identities, and thus has positive effects from this point of view. Growing decision-making power and the accumulation of administrative authority have led the EU and its supranational institutions – the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Court of Justice of the European Union – to consider their “borrowed sovereignty” as their own. The Commission is to be a super-government, the European Parliament a higher-level parliament, and the Court of Justice of the European Union the highest Constitutional Court of the Union. This is not in line with the treaties, so they are considered an obstacle and are often circumvented or violated. And national languages are slowly being replaced by Euro-English, a new bureaucratic variety of English. Opponents see this as a violation of the right to self-determination and an attempt to replace the Union as a union of states with a federal state.

However, nations are a permanent feature of Europe. Even in today’s Europe, their existence cannot be ignored. The problem with the European Union is that in its desire to combat nationalism, it combats patriotism, which is not contrary to a sense of solidarity with other Europeans or contrary to the spirit of Europe, but is its only possible foundation. What is more, a kind of EU “nationalism” is emerging before our very eyes, which considers anyone who does not share the arbitrary interpretation of the values generally enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union to be an enemy of “Europe”. This imperial EU nationalism was not directed against external enemies, but internal ones. In international politics, until recently – until the war in Ukraine – the EU was an “angel of peace”, preaching multilateralism, focusing on negotiations and its economic influence – somewhat out of necessity, as it has no military force at its disposal. However, as is typical of any empire, it has a sense of its own uniqueness and global mission. “Euro-nationalism” is becoming increasingly aggressive towards those it considers internal enemies. Its enemies are Catholic Poles, patriotic French, anti-immigration Italians, overly frugal Germans, the Visegrad Group, all “nationalists” attached to their homelands – France, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Spain. At the same time, however, there is a clear hierarchy of nations and states within the Union. As a result of progressive integration, some are rapidly losing their ability to take sovereign action, while others are gaining, primarily Germany. Without the EU, Germany would quickly be brought back down to size – it is still too small for

the world and too small to directly subjugate Europe. In the Union, it shares power with France, which retains the right of veto. The European Commission would not dare to interfere too bluntly in the internal affairs of these two countries. Beneath the surface of the Union’s transnational institutions, one can still see the old politics of countries aspiring to superpower status. The increasingly talked about “sovereignty” of Europe would allow these aspirations to be realised and would strengthen their own sovereignty rather than reduce it.

### Europe’s role in today’s balance of power

The political order in today’s Europe is unique and, perhaps, transitional. It is not clear which direction Europe will take. On the one hand, there are still countries that are internationally recognised as sovereign, pursuing their own foreign, defence and, to a certain extent, economic policies. On the other hand,



## “ The European Union requires a thorough restructuring, which should consist in clarifying and limiting its competences, and in renewing national and Christian traditions.

by joining the European Union, they have relinquished many of their powers – for example, control over their internal borders; it is the Union that now concludes international trade agreements on behalf of the states, sets climate and energy policy objectives, determines the overall economic strategy and plans transnational infrastructure. European countries have joined forces and transferred part of their sovereignty to a common pool in order to preserve and even strengthen it, as they claim. The treaties enshrine the principles of subsidiarity and organic competence. The Union, the division of responsibilities and powers between different levels of government. The Union is therefore only to deal with issues that individual Member States cannot handle on their own. Formally, it is still not a politically sovereign entity, but an international organisation, a bloc of states. Its growing decision-making power is based on the transfer of competences by states; it is a “borrowed” power. It is up to us to decide in which direction we will develop it.

Building a political union on this basis – aversion to faith, to one’s own history and traditions, to Christianity, especially in its Catholic understanding, to European nations – leads to a weak Europe. This is how Europe is losing ground to the United States and China, as overwhelming economic data shows. Building a bureaucratic monster based on the ideology of a multicultural, ahistorical, completely secularised society is not the way to strengthen Europe, but to accelerate its decline.

America renewed itself and built its power by reaching back to its roots, to the American creed. Making Europe great again, however, may be a more difficult task than renewing America. Europe needs a combination of spiritual and political unity and diversity. A different kind of European unity is possible than the bureaucratic one constructed from the headquarters in Berlaymont, but based on the cooperation of European nations, on their mutual respect and the principle of equality, a community of nations, their confederation, a “symmachia” referring to values that are already present in the European, Hesperian heritage. It is impossible to build Europe against the spirit of Europe, and therefore without Christianity, without reference to the great tradition in which Christianity interpreted, continued and transformed the Greek and Roman heritage. Today, Orthodox countries also belong to Europe. This opens the way to a new creative rethinking of our theology and philosophy.

Nor is it possible to build the future of Europe on the belief that European nations are a harmful relic that must be replaced by an open, multicultural pan-European society. Europe existed and exists through its nations. Europe was born with the European nations and will die with them. It is reflected in them, it is embodied in them. A nation is not, by its very nature, a “reactionary” community that suppresses the freedom of individuals. The freedom of nations and the freedom of individuals were intertwined and mutually dependent. Unity must be developed not against European nations, but between them. The European Union requires a thorough restructuring, which should consist in clarifying and limiting its competences, and in renewing national and Christian traditions. Only then can Europe become a credible member of the “West” in the growing competition with China, Russia and India. ▸



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# A conservative perspective for a **MORE FOCUSED EUROPEAN UNION**

**Lorenzo Castellani**

**A**s the international landscape shifts beneath our feet, with great power competition intensifying and traditional security guarantees becoming less certain, the European Union faces a fundamental question about its future trajectory. For too long, Brussels has pursued an expansionist vision of integration that promises everything but delivers too little. From a conservative perspective grounded in the principle of national sovereignty and institutional effectiveness, the time has come for a different approach: an EU that does less, but does it better. This essay argues that Europe's contribution to the Western alliance will be strengthened not by further centralization and sovereignty transfers, but by focusing EU competences on areas where genuine added value exists, while returning powers to national governments where they are better exercised. This vision encompasses the full spectrum of contemporary challenges: international relations, defense and security, economic competitiveness, and technological sovereignty.

The current moment demands strategic clarity. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has exposed Europe's dependence on external protection. China's industrial rise challenges the economic foundations of Western prosperity. The unpredictability of American commitment, particularly visible during the Trump administrations, compels Europeans to assume greater responsibility for their own security. Yet the response to these challenges should not be reflexive centralization.

**The notion that sovereignty can be "pooled" or "shared" without fundamentally diminishing national self-determination is a semantic sleight of hand.**

Instead, conservatives must advocate for a Europe that respects the primacy of nation-states while enabling effective cooperation in those domains where collective action genuinely multiplies capabilities rather than merely creating new bureaucracies.

In this context, Draghi's report on European competitiveness clearly highlighted the problems afflicting the European Union on an economic, technological and financial level. However, the solutions proposed by Draghi continue to draw on the usual toolbox of European centralization. A toolbox that has already proven its inconsistency.

This is why a conservative vision is needed to ensure that other institutional solutions and instruments are sought, rather than those of centralisation and dirigisme.

### The False Promise of European Federalism

The debate over European sovereignty reveals fundamental disagreements about the Union's purpose. Proponents of deeper integration, particularly in France under President Macron, have championed the concept of "European sovereignty" as a bulwark against American unpredictability and Chinese assertiveness. This vision imagines a federated Europe with centralized decision-making in foreign policy, defense, fiscal matters, and industrial strategy. The logic seems compelling: only a unified Europe with federal attributes can compete with continental-scale powers like the United States and China.

Yet this federalist ambition collides with both political reality and democratic principles. The notion that sovereignty can be "pooled" or "shared" without fundamentally diminishing national self-determination is a semantic sleight of hand. Sovereignty, properly understood, entails the ultimate authority to decide on matters of collective importance. When this authority transfers from national parliaments answerable to national electorates to supranational institutions with their own bureaucratic logic, something essential is lost. The recent experience with EU

governance during the eurozone crisis, where technocratic imperatives overrode democratic choices in debtor nations, illustrates this danger. The principal of democratic legitimacy is undermined, and the popular and electoral reaction becomes furious and unpredictable.

The conservative position recognizes that European nation-states remain the primary locus of democratic legitimacy, sovereignty and political identity. Attempts to create a "European demos" have failed precisely because national identities, formed through centuries of shared history, language, and culture, cannot be wished away by institutional innovation. The rise of sovereigntist movements across Europe, from Poland and Hungary to Italy and France, from Germany to Portugal reflects, among the other things, popular resistance to the progressive erosion of national prerogatives. Rather than dismissing these movements as reactionary or populist, conservatives should acknowledge their legitimate concern: that integration has proceeded beyond what most citizens consider acceptable and that it cannot go any further without causing serious political tensions and calls for the renationalisation of policy.

We need also to recognize, at the same time, that the European Union has failed for years on an issue where greater cooperation would have been necessary, such as controlling Europe's external borders against illegal immigration. Ultimately, the EU has done too much, often done it badly, and neglected policy areas

where more could have been done together. The rest of the world has grown and strengthened, while Europe has remained static, bureaucratic and trapped by its institutional contradictions. The delegitimation of European institutions is rooted in these weaknesses. Continuing to repeat the same patterns is pointless, even harmful. A different perspective is required that only conservative thought can provide.

Thinking about further European integration based on the current treaties is politically illogical. We would be faced with a false federalism, based on centralisation that does not respect the prerogatives of national and local powers. Further "federalist" integration could only eventually arise from a constituent process involving popular sovereignty. But today the EU is too large, too diverse and lacks the legitimacy to initiate a constituent process that involves parliaments and popular sovereignty. The only option for future institutional development remains a confederation, established through an agreement among nation States, limiting powers transferred to the European institutions and introducing solid mechanisms of checks and balances.

This does not mean rejecting European cooperation. Rather, it means insisting that cooperation must be based on voluntary coordination between sovereign nations, not on mandatory compliance with supranational authority. The principle of subsidiarity, enshrined in EU treaties but too often honoured in the breach, provides the conceptual framework. Decisions should be taken at the most local level capable of addressing them effectively. Only when

challenges genuinely exceed national capacity should authority move upward. The idea of a confederation, where only a few powers are centralised and subject to accountability by member states, appears better equipped to respond to current challenges.

### The Failures of Common Foreign Policy

Nowhere is the gap between EU ambition and capability more evident than in foreign policy. Despite the Lisbon Treaty's creation of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and the European External Action Service, the EU remains unable to speak with one voice or act decisively in international crises. The 2011 intervention in Libya, where France and Britain led while Germany abstained and Italy was skeptical, demonstrated that even with new institutional machinery, member states pursue divergent strategic interests. More recently, the varied responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted persistent divisions: while Eastern European states recognized the existential threat immediately, Western European nations, particularly Germany, Austria and Italy, were slower to abandon commercial relationships and energy dependencies.

The fundamental problem lies in attempting to forge common positions when genuine common interests do not exist. Southern European states naturally focus on Mediterranean challenges: migration from North Africa, instability in the Sahel, relations with Middle Eastern energy producers. Eastern European nations concentrate on the Russian threat, the security of their borders, and the integration of Ukraine and the Western Balkans. Northern states prioritize Arctic security and Baltic defense. These diverging threat perceptions and historical experiences cannot be harmonized through procedural mechanisms.

The unanimity requirement in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decisions reflects this reality. Far from being an antiquated obstacle to efficiency, unanimity protects vital national interests from being overridden by majority coalitions with different priorities. Recent proposals to extend qualified majority voting to foreign policy decisions would not create coherence but would instead generate resentment and non-compliance from outvoted minorities. A Hungarian government forced to support sanctions it opposes, or an Irish government compelled to participate in military operations contrary to its neutrality, would simply find ways to obstruct implementation.

The conservative alternative accepts this diversity. Rather than pursuing chimeral unity, the EU should facilitate coalitions of the willing among like-minded states. The European Intervention Initiative, launched by France outside EU structures, demonstrates this



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approach's viability just as the various bilateral treaties signed between the single nation-States (e.g. France-Germany, Italy-France). When states share genuine interests and threat assessments, they can cooperate effectively without requiring universal participation. This variable geometry respects sovereignty while enabling action.

This means abandoning the pretence that Brussels can conduct geopolitical strategy. Foreign policy requires the kind of strategic culture that emerges from historical experience, clear national interests, and democratic accountability to a specific polity. The EU possesses none of these attributes. Its diplomacy remains trapped in a "values-based" discourse that emphasizes norms and principles while avoiding hard choices about power and interests. The Global Gateway initiative, positioned as Europe's answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative, exemplifies this weakness. Despite mobilizing €300 billion for infrastructure investment, it lacks strategic coherence, clear prioritization, and the political will to leverage economic power for geopolitical objectives. Partner countries perceive it as offering less than Chinese alternatives while imposing more conditions.

### Defense and Security: Balancing Autonomy and Alliance

The security dimension presents the most complex challenge for conservative statecraft. On one hand, American unpredictability, particularly under a second Trump administration demanding that European NATO members spend 5% of GDP on defense, compels Europeans to build greater autonomous capability. On the other, NATO remains the most effective collective defense organization in history, and any European military effort divorced from Atlantic cooperation would be prohibitively expensive and strategically questionable.

The debate over "European strategic autonomy" has generated more confusion than clarity. French advocates envision autonomous European military capabilities that could operate independently of the United States. Eastern European skeptics fear this undermines NATO and creates dangerous ambiguity about security guarantees. German policymakers oscillate between wanting stronger European defense,

# “The progressive response calls for more Europe: more centralized industrial policy, more EU-level investment, more regulatory harmonization, and ultimately fiscal federalism to pool resources.”

but mostly implemented individually by the Nation-states, and worrying about antagonizing Washington in defense manufacturing.

The conservative position should thread this needle carefully. Europe does need enhanced military capabilities, not to replace NATO but to strengthen its European pillar. This means meeting the 2% of GDP defense spending target that most European NATO members have historically failed to achieve, and preparing for the 3.5% target that the 2025 NATO summit established. It means developing capabilities in areas where European shortfalls are most acute: air and missile defense, ammunition production, heavy artillery, drone warfare, strategic airlift, and intelligence assets.

In the logic of the confederation, it is acceptable that in times of war and international tension, the common defence budget should be increased. However, these resources must be allocated through the market and competition between defence companies without dirigiste pretensions. Skills, specialisation and market success will determine any mergers or acquisitions. State-led and Eurocentric initiatives such as those in the satellite or cloud sectors have in fact proved to be a waste of money without producing any appreciable results.

Where EU involvement adds value is in coordinating procurement to achieve economies of scale,

establishing common standards for interoperability, and supporting the defense industrial base through research funding. The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) mechanism, providing €150 billion in loans for defense procurement, represents a useful instrument precisely because it supports national decisions rather than imposing EU choices. Similarly, military mobility projects that improve infrastructure for rapid force deployment serve genuine collective needs.

The deeper issue concerns European strategic culture—or rather, its absence. Effective military power requires not just capabilities but the political will to employ them. This will emerge from clear perceptions of national interest and threats, democratic support for necessary sacrifices, and leadership willing to make difficult decisions. These prerequisites exist at the national level, where governments answer to their citizens for security policies. They cannot be manufactured at the European level, where diffuse responsibility enables blame-shifting and risk aversion.

Consider the contrast between Poland's response to Russian aggression and Germany's hesitation. Poland immediately recognized the threat to its existence and marshalled resources accordingly. Germany, with different historical experiences, constitutional settlement and economic dependencies, moved slowly and reluctantly. An EU defense policy that tried to split these differences would satisfy neither. Better to accept that Poland, the Baltic states, and other front-line nations will maintain robust defenses with NATO support, while other member states focus their contributions on different capabilities based on their strategic circumstances.

This does not preclude cooperation nor achieving a better commands' cooperation. Indeed, it enables more effective cooperation because it aligns responsibilities with interests and capabilities. The key is avoiding the trap of believing that institutional integration creates strategic coherence. It does not. Strategic coherence emerges from shared threat perception, compatible interests, and mutual trust—prerequisites that cannot be conjured through treaty amendments. Only political will legitimised by national democracies can build stronger coordination among armies.

### Economic Policy: Competitiveness Through Decentralization

The economic dimension reveals the most fundamental divergence between conservative and progressive visions of Europe. For decades, the EU has pursued harmonization and integration as ends in themselves, assuming that deeper economic union would automatically generate prosperity. The results

have been disappointing. European productivity has stagnated relative to the United States, with EU GDP per capita remaining at approximately 70% of American levels for thirty years. The Draghi Report on European competitiveness documented this failure in devastating detail: excessive regulation, fragmented markets, underinvestment in innovation, and high energy costs have eroded Europe's industrial base.

The progressive response calls for more Europe: more centralized industrial policy, more EU-level investment, more regulatory harmonization, and ultimately fiscal federalism to pool resources. The conservative response recognizes that centralization often creates the problems it claims to solve. The single market, when focused on removing barriers to trade and movement, generated genuine benefits. But as EU competence expanded into ever more areas—social policy, environmental regulation, consumer protection, data and AI governance—the regulatory burden multiplied. Companies face not simplified rules but accumulating layers of EU and national regulation, often contradictory or redundant.

The principle of "less but better" applies with particular force to economic governance. Rather than expanding EU regulatory reach, conservatives should advocate returning competences to member states in areas where national diversity is economically beneficial. Labor market regulation, for example, should reflect national traditions and social preferences. German codetermination, French worker protections, and Danish flexicurity represent different social bargains suited to different contexts. The same is for industrial and technological development policies where every member State has its own peculiarities. Imposing uniform rules reduces this beneficial diversity without generating compensating advantages.

Similarly, fiscal policy should remain a national prerogative. The Stability and Growth Pact, designed to coordinate budget discipline, has been repeatedly violated by major member states and suspended during crises. Rather than pursuing fiscal federalism or Eurobonds, without political legitimacy, conservatives should insist that sovereign nations bear responsibility for their own fiscal choices and their consequences in front of financial markets. This includes the possibility of debt restructuring, when necessary, rather than bailouts that socialize losses while privatizing gains. Consider Italy, today, the spread on government bonds is much lower than in the past, not because of European aid, but because the Meloni government has kept its accounts in order.

Where EU involvement adds value is in maintaining genuinely common rules that enable market integration without harmonizing substantive policies. Competition policy, which prevents national subsidies from distorting the single market, serves this purpose.

Trade policy, where the EU's collective bargaining power exceeds what individual states could achieve, represents another legitimate area of common action. Cohesion funds that help less developed regions catch up to European averages, provided they support infrastructure and education rather than consumption, can justify themselves on grounds of solidarity and mutual advantage. Another possible innovation would be to relax the European competition authority's actions, which have often prevented the market from functioning as it should, often for ideological reasons. Natural monopolies, which are created through market forces, should not be stopped. We should follow the example of the US, where the economy is based on monopolies and oligopolies that arise from the market, and no regulator has ever thought of stopping mergers and acquisitions or breaking up monopolies.

The technology sector illustrates both the promise and perils of EU industrial policy. The European Chips Act, mobilizing €43 billion to strengthen semiconductor manufacturing, responds to genuine strategic vulnerability. Dependence on Asian chip production creates supply chain risks and limits European technological sovereignty. Yet the Act's effectiveness remains uncertain. Subsidizing production capacity without addressing the regulatory and fiscal environment that drove semiconductor manufacturing elsewhere may simply transfer taxpayer resources to multinational corporations without creating sustainable industry.

More fundamentally, technological leadership emerges from innovation ecosystems that combine research excellence, risk capital, entrepreneurial culture, and flexible labor markets. These ingredients exist at the regional and national levels—think of Germany's *Mittelstand*, France's *grandes écoles*, or the Netherlands' high-tech clusters—not at the EU level. Rather than trying to create a European Silicon Valley through centralized funding, policy should enable national and regional innovation systems to flourish by reducing regulatory barriers, improving capital markets, and allowing competitive diversity.

The obsession with “digital sovereignty,” while understandable as a response to American and Chinese dominance, risks protectionism that ultimately harms European consumers and businesses. Data localization requirements, restrictions on non-EU cloud providers, and preferences for European technology suppliers may serve bureaucratic visions of autonomy but

undermine competitiveness. True sovereignty comes from excellence, not from walls. If European companies cannot compete, forcing Europeans to use inferior or local alternatives, or even worse relying on Chinese technologies, impoverishes them without creating successful industries.

### A disastrous Green Deal

A crucial illustration of Brussels' overreach lies in the European Green Deal, which, despite its noble intent to decarbonize the economy and reach climate neutrality, has displayed several contradictions and impracticalities that conservatives must address. The Green Deal's stringent regulatory targets—such as banning internal combustion engines from 2035 and imposing ambitious emissions reductions—have placed enormous pressures on Europe's industrial base, particularly in the automotive and manufacturing sectors, without producing proportional global environmental impacts. Europe's share of worldwide CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is just above 5%, and even the most radical domestic measures do little to shift the global needle when major polluters such as China, the United States, India, and Russia do not follow comparable paths.

Instead of catalyzing the virtuous cycle of mass investment in green infrastructure and technology, the Green Deal has risked Europe's competitive position by amplifying deindustrialization, raising energy costs, and making EU products less attractive relative to global competitors,

especially China which is already dominating critical green technology supply chains. The policy's ideological rigidity—focusing almost exclusively on electric vehicles and marginalizing alternatives like synthetic fuels and hydrogen—shows how Brussels' technocratic approach undermines both economic rationality and technological neutrality. As Mario Draghi himself noted,

the presumption that ambitious targets would automatically produce innovation and cost savings has often proven unrealistic, leading to regulatory burdens unaligned with market and technological evolution.

The impact of such extremism is not limited to industry. The Green Deal's social and economic costs disproportionately affect vulnerable European regions, risking widespread unemployment and undermining public support for climate action. Recent retreat from ambitious pesticide reduction, watered-down nature

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restoration laws, and ongoing dilution of industrial emissions regulations demonstrate the Green Deal's practical limitations and political risk. Instead of rigid central planning, conservatives should advocate pragmatic climate policies built on technological neutrality, incentives for innovation, and a realistic assessment of Europe's capacity to compete globally without sacrificing the prosperity of its citizens or strategic independence and without advantaging non-European competitors with self-inflicted damages.

### Technology and the Limits of Strategic Autonomy

The technology dimension connects economic policy to security concerns, as digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing have both commercial and strategic implications. China's technological rise, built on industrial policy, massive state investment, and technology transfer (voluntary and otherwise), challenges Western technological leadership. The United States responds with its own industrial policy, subsidizing domestic production and restricting technology exports to China. Where does Europe fit in this new technology competition?

The temptation is to emulate Chinese and American approaches through centralized EU industrial policy. The Chips Act represents one such effort. The European Defence Fund aims to coordinate defense technology development. The Global Gateway seeks to project European technological standards internationally. Yet these initiatives struggle against structural shortcomings. The EU lacks both the fiscal capacity of the American federal government and the political coherence of the Chinese state.

Moreover, the logic of technological sovereignty contains contradictions. Take semiconductors. Even with massive investment, Europe cannot hope to match the scale of Taiwanese or Korean production or the integrated supply chains of East Asia. Attempting autarky would be astronomically expensive and strategically questionable, as it would reduce the interdependence that makes major war between trading partners costly. A more realistic goal would be ensuring adequate supply for critical applications—defense, infrastructure—while

accepting dependence for consumer applications where markets can provide redundancy.

The conservative approach emphasizes enabling private sector innovation rather than directing it through state planning. This means improving framework conditions: better universities, more flexible labor markets, deeper capital markets, lower corporate taxation, and less regulatory burden. It means accepting that successful technology clusters emerge organically from combinations of talent, capital, and entrepreneurial culture that cannot be engineered from Brussels. And it means recognizing that Europe's strength lies in specific niches—industrial automation, advanced manufacturing, automotive engineering, pharmaceuticals—rather than trying to compete across all technology domains. New trade agreements are also an avenue worth exploring. The European Union is a large market and has the negotiating power to secure more secure supply chains through international agreements.

The regulatory approach to technology reveals a characteristic EU tendency: attempting to lead through standard-setting when unable to compete in innovation. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), positioned as a model for the world, has generated compliance costs without demonstrably improving privacy protection or European competitiveness.

The Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act continue this pattern, imposing heavy regulatory requirements on digital platforms, most of which are non-European. While preventing monopolistic abuse is legitimate, using regulation as industrial



policy by other means risks isolating Europe from global technology development.

A more productive approach would foster European technology champions through favorable national policies while maintaining market openness. This might mean tolerating greater corporate concentration in strategic sectors, providing tax incentives for research and development, and reducing the bureaucratic burden on innovative companies.

### The Institutional Question: Reform, Not Expansion

The conservative critique of the EU's current trajectory ultimately raises institutional questions. If the Union is to do less but better, how should it be organized? Several principles should guide reform.

First, the scope of qualified majority voting in the European Council should not be extended further, particularly in areas touching core sovereignty: foreign policy, taxation, and social policy. The unanimity requirement, far from being an obstacle to efficiency, protects legitimate diversity and forces consensus-building. Proposals to extend QMV in the name of cohesion would merely replace negotiated compromises with top-down imposed solutions, generating resentment and non-compliance from outvoted minorities.

Second, there should be mechanisms for returning competences to member states when EU action has proven ineffective or unnecessary. The EU's perpetual ratchet, where integration only moves forward and never backward, lacks democratic justification. If "ever closer union" is not an immutable destiny, then sometimes "less union" may serve European interests better. Creating procedures for repatriation of competences would discipline EU institutions and force ongoing justification of their activities.

Third, a strong proposal for deregulation is needed. The European Union produces excessive regulation that penalises European companies compared to the rest of the world. Anything that is not expressly prohibited by laws and regulations should be considered lawful. The level of regulation must be drastically reduced. Prosperity comes from freedom, not from standardisation and endless uniform rules. The obsession with safety, security and sustainability of the European Commission must end to make way for entrepreneurial initiative.

These reforms would not weaken Europe; they would strengthen it by aligning EU activities with genuine common interests while respecting national prerogatives. A more focused Union, concentrating on areas where collective action multiplies national capabilities, would command greater legitimacy and effectiveness than the current model of expansive but ineffective ambition.



### A European Confederation in the Western Alliance

Returning to the starting question—the EU's role in the Western alliance—the conservative vision offers a clear answer. Europe's contribution to Western security and prosperity will be maximized not through federal integration but through effective nation-states cooperating where interests align and integrated, at institutional level, into a Confederation which can enhance the common strengths.

In security terms, this means robust national defense capabilities, coordinated through NATO, with the EU playing a supporting role in standardization, research, and industrial cooperation. It means accepting that frontline states will maintain different force structures and readiness levels than those farther from threats, and that this diversity strengthens rather than weakens collective defense. It means European strategic autonomy understood not as independence from America but as the ability to act when American priorities diverge, without pretending that Europeans alone can guarantee their security.

In economic terms, it means an EU focused on maintaining open markets, preventing protectionism, and providing limited common goods—research funding, infrastructure in less developed regions, competition enforcement—while leaving industrial policy, fiscal policy, and social models to national governments. It means accepting that competitive diversity between European economies is a feature, not a bug, encouraging innovation and experimentation rather than enforcing uniformity.

In technological terms, it means fostering national and regional innovation ecosystems rather than attempting centralized direction. It means strategic cooperation on critical technologies and supply chains without pursuing autarky but looking for new international trade agreements. And it means setting framework conditions that enable European companies to compete globally rather than protecting them from competition.

In foreign policy terms, it means abandoning the pretence of unitary EU foreign policy in favour of coordination between sovereign nations. It means accepting that member states will pursue different relationships with external powers based on their geography, history, and interests. And it means focusing EU diplomatic efforts on areas where genuine common interests

exist—trade negotiations, neighbourhood stabilization, development cooperation—rather than attempting to forge positions on every international question. At the same time, the European Union must not lose sight of its natural alliances in political and cultural terms. The relationship with the United States of America must remain a priority. NATO is the framework within which European defence can be strengthened. Trade agreements are also a means of securing supply chains, and the European Union should work harder on this. Tariffs, as a foreign policy tool, should not be directed at allies, even if they are responsible for a change in policy, as in the case of the Americans, but at countries that threaten Europe with weapons and goods.

This vision will disappoint those who dream of a European superstate rivalling the United States and China. But it offers something more valuable: a realistic path forwards that respects democratic sovereignty, enables effective action where common interests exist, and preserves the national diversity that has long been Europe's strength. In an era of great power competition and strategic uncertainty, the West needs

strong European nations cooperating effectively, not a weak European federation attempting to impose unity where none genuinely exists.

The choice is not between nation and Europe but between two models of Europe: one that respects national sovereignty while enabling cooperation and coordination, and one that pursues integration as an end in itself regardless of democratic support or practical effectiveness.

Conservatives must champion the former, a Europe that does less but does it better, recognizing that in statecraft as in architecture, strength comes not from size but from sound foundations. Such a Europe, focused and effective, would be a more valuable partner in the Western alliance than the sprawling, overambitious, and ultimately ineffective construct that current trajectories portend. ▀

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# WHY A FEDERAL EUROPE CANNOT WORK FOR HISTORICAL REASONS

Chantal Delsol

**W**e must be wary of the word “federalism”. In many European circles the meaning of the word has become lost or misunderstood. In France, sovereigntist movements commonly use the word “federalism” as a synonym for a centralising empire – the word means exactly the opposite. Federalism, and the closely related concept of confederalism, refer to a system in which intermediate bodies and regions enjoy a high degree of autonomy, with the state exercising only strictly sovereign powers. Some would have liked Europe to remain as it was in its early decades, when sovereign nations only entered into economic or agricultural agreements. Some would have liked to see a federal or confederal Europe, in the true sense of the word and not in the pejorative sense. But none of this has happened. The European institution

has allowed itself to be drawn into the monopoly of the economy, as if money could solve everything, as if humans did not also need roots, memories and principles of life, which lie in territories and communities. The Polish writer Stasiuk exclaims: “We don’t want a future where there is no longer Poland and France, but only Coca-Cola and Cola! “ Instead of wisely resisting materialistic temptation, the European elites have slipped into an ideological whirlwind that is prompting them to renounce even their founding principles. It is this whirlwind that I want to talk about.

## The denial of the principle of subsidiarity

The European project was magnificent because it was entirely suited to the demands of globalisation and global competition. The nations at the Western most tip of the Eurasian landmass had to unite in some way because, after conquering the world through Empire and then through cultural *soft power*, they had become weak separately. Above all, they had to unite to prevent a “European civil war” (Ernst Nolte). They had to unite to strengthen their common culture, since

all of them, from France to Romania, claim to belong to the same culture, even if their histories and temperaments differ. It should be noted that Europe is diverse by nature, because its culture is structured around the idea of freedom. From the democracy of the ancients to the institution of

**In today’s institutional Europe, since the turn of the century, both subsidiarity (autonomy of action) and democracy (autonomy of political choice) have been challenged.**

the one God, which gives man his autonomy and responsibility for himself, everything encourages us to revere the diversity that comes from it. Europe could therefore only be forged by respecting its national autonomies, lest it deny itself.

This could only be achieved through the principle of subsidiarity, which has been present in Europe since Aristotle and has been described throughout history, finally receiving its current name in the 19th century. It is a principle of autonomy, but different from the one that underpins democracy.

Democracy is based on the principle that all humans, if they are adults and of sound mind, are capable of choosing their government – they all have enough discernment to choose their spouse or educate their children, and also to choose their political leader. Subsidiarity is based on the principle that all humans, adults and of sound mind, are capable of managing their own economic affairs and their personal and family lives. The main architect of the theory of subsidiarity in Europe was the German Althusius (17th century), who was not a ‘democrat’ in the modern sense, since modern democracy only appeared at the end of the 18th century.

In today’s institutional Europe, since the turn of the century, both subsidiarity (autonomy of action) and democracy (autonomy of political choice) have

## “The founders of Europe do not really know where Europe’s borders should lie, because they have no idea of their own identity, and they do not want to have one.”

been challenged. I will describe here the rejection of subsidiarity and, in the last part, the denial of democracy. The principle of subsidiarity means that autonomy of action is left to the lowest level (the family, village or association, etc.), with the lower levels responsible for offloading overly burdensome but necessary tasks to the higher levels. In other words, it is the municipality that asks the region to help it solve problems that are too overwhelming for it, and it is the region that asks the state to help it solve problems that are too overwhelming for it. Whereas in centralised countries, of which France is the best example, it is the state that does everything down to the smallest detail, and offloads the excess onto smaller communities.

Was Europe to be created as an institution based on the principle of subsidiarity, as is the case in federal countries such as Germany? Or was it to be based on the Jacobin principle of complete centralisation, as in France? Was it to start from the bottom or from the top? Common sense suggested starting from the bottom, because each nation has its own customs and ways of being, and is perfectly capable of governing itself in all areas of everyday life. In other words, common sense suggested that institutional Europe should follow the German model. But at that time, for historical reasons, France dominated. Quite naturally, Europe was built on the French model. How did this happen?

In the early 1990s, Jacques Delors asked me to join a think tank in Brussels on subsidiarity to study how this principle could be applied to the Europe that was being built. It is interesting to note that there was a real desire at the time to ‘start from the bottom’ – at least in principle, because when the leaders, led by Delors, understood what this really meant, they recused themselves. Indeed, the principle of subsidiarity removes all power from the top: the president of the Swiss Confederation has very little power and is not well known. Meanwhile, the institutional leaders of Europe at the time had no intention of letting nations decide their own actions. But the most interesting thing is that they wanted to cloak themselves in the mantle of subsidiarity, in order to appear respectful of the great culture of European autonomy, while at the same time ushering in a period of despotism (it is J. Delors himself who uses the word). In other words, they wanted to take advantage of the principle of autonomy without suffering its disadvantages – and to do so, they twisted the principle of subsidiarity. I witnessed this hypocritical falsification first-hand, which led me to resign in disgust.

This is how the principle of subsidiarity has been distorted. As we have said, the lower level asks for help from the level immediately above it when it is unable to satisfy the common good on its own. We give the example of German cities asking the Länder for help in meeting the population’s needs in terms of sport. What is the need and who will define it? Here we are talking about sport, not golf, for example. The question of who defines the common good is a recurring one in Germany. This is because the definition of the necessary good will determine who has jurisdiction: the level that is insufficient to provide the necessary

good loses that jurisdiction, which moves up to the higher level. In the Europe of Brussels at the end of the 20th century, this is how things work: if the leaders in Brussels decree that the level of the European ecological common good is set at the level of the best-performing countries, then all the other countries will find themselves inadequate and will be forced to hand over their powers to Brussels. Europe is becoming centralised because it is the European institution that decrees the level of the common good, and in doing so, it continues to claim subsidiarity, as described in , through a subterfuge of language that is as treacherous as it is dishonourable. Jacques Delors knows very well what he is doing, since in his 1999 speech in Strasbourg Cathedral he described his work as follows: “this technocratic-looking construction is progressing under the aegis of a kind of gentle and enlightened despotism”.

This explains why institutional Europe did not want to become a confederation of nations: it did not want to apply subsidiarity, convinced from the outset that nations were not capable of responding to new challenges. It was also convinced that only those in charge in Brussels could find the right answers. As a result, a few decades later, a large part of our laws come from the European institution and not from our national assemblies. For my part, I believe that our nations are perfectly capable of taking care of their own health, schools, qualifications and agriculture, to name but a few examples. This is why, for example, when the Covid epidemic broke out, European countries had to wait for their vaccines from Europe, under the pretext of the permanent benefits of size and bulk purchasing, and the decision-making power of the most powerful. And in absolutely every area, it is the European institution that takes care of us, directs our tastes and mothers us in every way, imposing the mechanism of bottle caps and the substances that make up our products, producing millions of standards and controls every day in the smallest, most personal and most ramified areas.

But why did our leaders behave in this way, they who were the heirs to a culture of autonomy? Several factors played a part. First, the strong presence of France, a country where for centuries it has been considered that citizens can do nothing without a centralised state. Then there is the delirium of power into which rulers so easily fall when nothing stops them – which led Montesquieu to say that monarchies flow towards despotism “as rivers flow towards the sea”. But above all, there was one predominant factor that is not discussed enough: European leaders were driven by an ideology in which they believed wholeheartedly, and were convinced of their quasi-evangelical mission to lead ignorant peoples to the paradise of the future, spearheaded by their own thinking. I will describe

this ideology below. No confederal Europe could exist with leaders incapable of respecting the autonomy of nations. If Jacques Delors boasts of having built a despotic Europe, it is because any kind of federation proved unthinkable. Another equally important question arises here.

### The question of identifying the enemy

If Europe had become a federation or a confederation, a federal or confederal government would have had to assume specific sovereign powers, starting with the external defence of Europe. Moreover, was not one of the goals of the institution to ensure a common defence in the face of an increasingly perilous international environment after the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall?

The international life of a nation or group of nations is never a walk in the park. The world is not like a civil society, structured by laws and protected by a police force, but rather like an anarchic jungle where, very often, anything goes. It is therefore a question of living amid these dangers, which are not always visible. And the question is often how to define the enemy, because the enemy is not necessarily the one who invades you directly, but the one who attacks you with dirty tricks, or by attacking an ally. It is not uncommon for citizens of the same country to disagree on who the enemy is. For example, in France today, many believe that the enemy is Russia, because it is invading Ukraine and threatening NATO countries; but others believe that the enemy is America, which is invading everyone in a much more insidious way. The role of a state is to designate the enemy, and during the Cold War, when the powerful Communist Party received its subsidies from Moscow, the guns of our tanks were pointed towards the East.

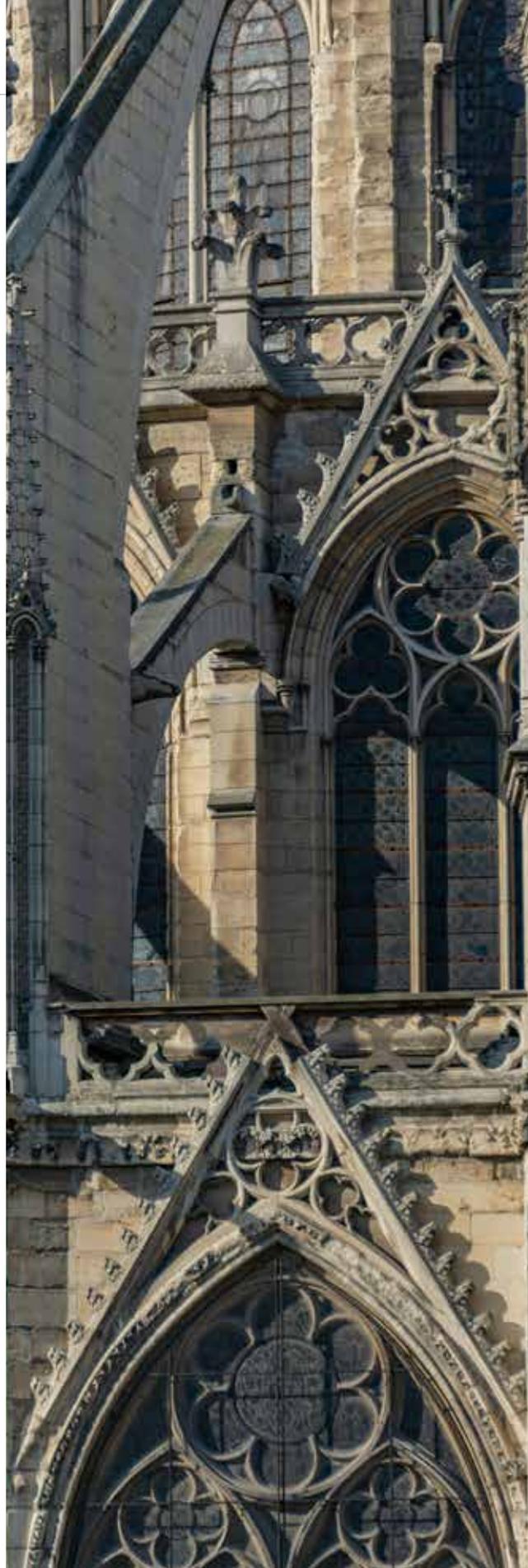
The question then is: if institutional Europe really existed as a political entity, how would it define its enemy? This is where the ideology of European leaders comes into play.

To designate the enemy, one must believe in the enemy! Yet for half a century after the Second World War, the elites of our countries entered into a vast and profound utopia. They believed that democracy was a system “for ever and everywhere”. The European cultural empire (i.e. the successor to the vanished colonial empire) brought democracy everywhere, fomented “colour revolutions”, and congratulated itself on seeing Indians create a democracy and Muslims allow unveiled women into their universities. Theories emerged that presented European democracy as “the end of history” (Francis Fukuyama), and therefore the last regime, which would have no successor but would last forever. Bolstered by this sense of historical

immortality and geographical infinity, Europeans believed that there would never be war again, since democracy is a peaceful regime that always operates under the rule of law. Our elites were not peaceful, they were pacifist. For half a century, European countries stopped buying weapons and instead bought trains and aeroplanes. Of course, we produced the nuclear bomb, and Mitterrand said that the missiles were in the East, which was indeed a designation. But we convinced ourselves that through the workings of international courts, over which the West had control, war would henceforth be replaced by the police – which was the result of our global cultural empire. When Julien Freund wrote in his thesis that politics is fundamentally structured by the friend/enemy dichotomy, he was insulted during his defence and ultimately ostracised for his reactionary tendencies. This powerful trend, which coloured all our elites, emanated from a post-Marxist utopia, and it would be easy to show how the revolutionary heaven, son of the Christian heaven but descended to earth, gave rise to all kinds of nonsense in the form of hopes. The fact remains that, convinced of the futility of war, European leaders busied themselves with creating tribunals to judge tyrants throughout the world, but were indignant when asked to “name the enemy”. For well-bred, left-wing people have no enemies.

The way in which Europe was formed is also indicative of this mindset. The founders of Europe do not really know where Europe’s borders should lie, because they have no idea of their own identity, and they do not want to have one, as I will discuss later. They are therefore prepared to allow the most disparate countries, such as Turkey, to join their club. The only caveat they express when asked for an entry ticket is economic. No one thinks for a second that the countries of the Union must be compatible in terms of designating the enemy – since it is believed that there will never be an enemy again. And so the decades pass.

In our quest to free ourselves from all human laws, including the most natural ones (as if they had been invented solely to tyrannise us), we had forgotten one intangible human law of global societies: we cannot erase the enemy, because it is the enemy who chooses me. And in the still irenic atmosphere of the post-war period, of the “let’s all kiss and make up” variety, Russia invaded Ukraine. It was as if the scales had fallen from our eyes. Germany, which always wants to be top of the class (and succeeds very well, for better or for worse), and which had been tearfully pacifist, suddenly promises to build Europe’s first arsenal soon (and of course it will succeed). France, which had spent years buying ice cream instead of maintaining its military equipment, is making a complete turnaround. I admit that I was pleasantly



surprised by these rapid reactions from leaders who had been stuck in conceptual irenicism for so long. This probably meant that they did not really believe in their own irenic rhetoric, but rather used it as a kind of ideological theatrical cloak – how dangerous it is for a people to give themselves such leaders! But the fact remains that the discourse on the enemy has reappeared, as it must, since the enemy has chosen us, as always. Only this discourse is reappearing amid astonishment and panic, because institutional Europe was built entirely to control the way European citizens live in a maniacal and obsessive manner, but not at all to deal with matters of sovereignty (the only domain that should be its responsibility) – and ultimately we realise that not all countries in the Union have the same enemy.

One of the sovereign powers of the European institution could just as easily have been to guard the borders of our continent in order to filter the entry of migrants and only allow those who are welcome to enter. Here, there has been much talk and very little action. The bottom line is that our European leaders, because of their own ideology, do not understand why people want borders to be guarded.

### Globalism and indifference

The idea of democracy as the “end of history”, pacifism and the denial of the enemy are all part of a broader whole, which can be described as a post-modern ideology in its own right. This ideology, utopian as they all are to varying degrees, is characterised by globalism, indifference or denial of particular identities, and the dream of a nomadic and agnostic global culture. The leaders of institutional Europe, who are part of this nomadic and agnostic elite, use their normative power to impose their views on the people, and are indignant to find that the people still hold ideas of rootedness, identity and patriotism.

The founding roots of European culture are religious in origin, with Judeo-Christianity providing the cultural matrix. During the drafting of the European Constitution, the question of affirming Europe’s Christian roots was raised in the European Council. Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Greece and Poland declared themselves in favour of this reference. Jacques Chirac declared himself against it, bringing Belgium and Sweden with him. Three countries imposed their view on all the others, which clearly shows the strength of the pressure to remove any reference to religion. In 2012, Slovakia,

on the occasion of the 1500th anniversary of the mission of Cyril and Methodius to Great Moravia, minted a two-euro coin bearing the image of these saints on the national side. Immediately, France, followed by the Commission, demanded that the halos and crosses of these saints be removed. A revolt by Slovak public opinion persuaded the country’s government not to comply. When Viktor Orban adopted a new constitution for Hungary with a preamble emphasising “the unifying virtue of Christianity for the Hungarian nation”, the matter gave rise to literally hysterical debates in the European Parliament.

Let us be clear. It is obvious that Christianity (in the sense of dominant Christian culture) has disappeared. But here we are saying that it never existed – like when a regime erases its enemies from the photo of the founding of the Party...

Please switch off your mobile phones when you enter the conference room. Put your mobile phones on aeroplane mode. Forget your private conversations, which you can resume later. Please switch off your religious beliefs when you enter the classroom, the chamber, the conference room. Put God on aeroplane mode. He has nothing to do with any of this. You can resume your private conversation with him when you have finished with the important matters. And yet. Hasn’t the religion of our origins structured our continent at its very core? Isn’t it the foundation of truth and human dignity, science, universality, freedom and democracy – in short, everything that makes us who we are? Do our Western European leaders imagine that it is through this deafening void that they will respond to the spread of Islamism? History often shows that elites rush to their downfall through moral and spiritual capitulation.

The denial of particular identities, of which the issue of Christian origins is only one characteristic aspect, leads European leaders to believe that, in the face of our demographic decline, it is enough to import labour, as if behind that labour there were not always a culture. To think that, in the face of the decline of Christianity, Islam will do the trick, as if it were not a culture that radically denies our own, or as if our own culture no longer mattered. And – an important and worrying observation – European institutional globalism is not a salon opinion, but rather a radical and verbose ideology, as intolerant as Marxist internationalism was in the last century, which loudly despises its opponents and ostracises them. It is in this martial spirit that European technocracy is unfolding.

**Our elites were not peaceful, they were pacifist. For half a century, European countries stopped buying weapons and instead bought trains and aeroplanes.**

## Technocracy and politics as a science

What is the basis of classical democracy, as described by Tocqueville and as it triumphed over totalitarianism in the second half of the 20th century? Legally: on popular sovereignty. What does this mean philosophically? It means a certainty rooted in our souls: all individuals in a nation, as soon as they are adults and of sound mind, regardless of their culture and knowledge, possess to the same degree what is called common sense, which enables them to conduct themselves in life and consequently to vote for their rulers. Even the most ignorant individual is capable of choosing a spouse and educating their children, because they are endowed with common sense – by the same common sense, they are capable of choosing their rulers. We cannot help but quote Chesterton (in Orthodoxy): “Such is the first principle of democracy: the essential things among men are those they possess in common, not those they possess separately.... These things we want a man to do for himself, even if he does them badly....

The democratic faith is this: the most terribly important things must be entrusted to ordinary men – the mating of the sexes, the education of the young, the laws of the state – that is democracy.” Here we must emphasise a very important expression in Chesterton’s text: ‘even if he does them badly’. This means that the autonomy of the individual is more important than the perfection of the act. The principle of technocracy, on the contrary, is to seek scientific perfection in the act, suppressing all autonomy if necessary.

I spoke of certainty, Chesterton even speaks of faith: it is a belief specific to the West. For example, the Chinese believe that the average Chinese person is not capable of choosing their rulers, who must behave like “the father and mother of the people” (the permanent definition of the emperor and ruler in China). In other words, for the Chinese, the people are not composed of adults, but of children who must be guided – politics resembles a work of education or fatherhood. The essential definition of democracy is this: the people are adults – we must believe in this (in this regard, it should be noted that the debate between those who identify politics with fatherhood and those who see it as the government of free men can already be found between Plato and Aristotle in Aristotle’s *Politics*. We democrats are the descendants of Aristotle).

**Defenders of the previous order see their moral order disappearing and speak of nihilism. But with a few exceptions, this is not nihilism. It is the replacement of community morality with individual morality, still according to the same principles.**

Confidence in democracy, established in Western countries from the 19th century onwards, began to be shaken during the 20th century with the rise of totalitarianism and fascism, which often emerged from popular votes. The sovereignty of the people gave rise to Nazism in Germany in 1933, and in France and Italy in the post-war period, elections almost gave power to the communists. In other words, the people can give power to leaders who announce their intention to abolish elections (today, the popular vote that we have brought to the world has enabled the Palestinians to elect Hamas). At the beginning of the 20th century, analyses of ‘mass democracy’ (Le Bon, Ortega y Gasset) began to develop: individually, human beings are endowed with common sense and capable of choosing their rulers, but when they are massified, they lose control of their actions. This observation did not bode well for the future of democracy. Confidence in popular common sense gradually faded among the elites when so-called populist movements emerged at the end of the 20th century. As a result, European

leaders now only trust technocracy and expert government, the quest for a ‘technical government’. It must be understood that there is no longer any political alternative, but only one path, the one designated by the experts (TINA, as Thatcher said: there is no alternative). The very notion of politics is collapsing, along with democracy. For politics is not a science, but an art, and it fundamentally involves un-

certain, random and debatable decisions. Democracy is politics left to everyone because everyone is endowed with common sense. By adopting technocracy, the European institutions are erasing both. The questioning of the results of the 2005 referendum in France is a chilling example of this.

It could be said that, at the turn of the 21st century, everything was in place to justify and enshrine mistrust of old-fashioned “common sense”: it was responsible for Nazism and today it is conservative, too often rejecting the new liberal-libertarian morality that those in power want to impose. As always happens in history, urban elites are the spearheads of the new moral religion, while the people are more cautious. ‘Common sense’, that popular language which guarantees democratic legitimacy, is here and there criticised, devalued and rebuffed. I will cite just one example: Sophia Rosenfeld’s book on common sense, which presents it as a founding ideology of populism... Today, there are countless challenges to popular ‘common sense’,

and discussions on the subject are sparking debates among anthropologists. In short, the present moment is dominated by the temptation of expert government: Plato’s “competent” people. Those who are governed are then treated like children, as the Chinese believe, as Plato once believed. An expression often used in the European Union sums it up well: “Are there any adults in the room?” This expression horribly confirms the contempt of our elites for the people who have lost their legitimacy. The ‘sovereignty of the people’ has become the obsolete definition of a democratic regime that is now only a facade.

However, we must go further: European technocracy is nothing more than the scientific front for an ideological conviction that imposes itself under the guise of objectivity.

## The government as moral prescriber

Democracy suffers from technocracy, which undermines it as a pluralistic decision-making process, and at the same time from a collapse of secularisation, which places religious decisions in the hands of national or European governments. This recent metamorphosis needs to be briefly described.

At the end of the Second World War, Western European countries understood democracy in the classical, Tocquevillian sense: a regime based on the sovereignty of the people. And this is how they implemented it after fifty years of various dictatorships and totalitarianism. Western democracy as “sovereignty of the people” allows the people to choose and decide on their politics and economy. All kinds of choices are possible. For example, in 1981, the French people elected a socialist president and assembly who immediately nationalised the economy. This is where the moral factor comes in. For centuries, Western countries were governed by Christian morality, which was accepted by virtually everyone. Morality was Christian, defined by traditional religion and sanctioned by political powers. For example, abortion was criminalised by the Church, and those guilty of abortion were punished by the criminal justice system of the state – all by consensus: Western societies were overwhelmingly Christian.

From the 1960s onwards, Christian morality, which had previously been consensual (allowing harmony between the religion that defined it and the state that sanctioned it), came under attack from all sides. Within a few decades, it was replaced by a post-Christian morality, derived from the Gospel (nothing is ever created *ex nihilo*) but without transcendence, which exacerbates its principles (equality in dignity) by interpreting them in an individualistic way and demanding their application here and now. It demands the extreme of personal dignity in terms of individual freedom, against all institutions (family, school,

Church, etc.). The individual is sacralised and must be protected from any attack on their dignity/freedom. Everyone chooses their affiliations and rejects all unchosen identities – hence the citizen of the world and the “choice of gender”. This is the morality of care, wokeism and cosmopolitanism, the subversive heir to Christianity. It represents an extreme consequence of the Enlightenment, as Marxism was, but here on an individual level. Here, moreover, as was the case with the Enlightenment since the revolutionary season, there is an intense desire to completely get rid of traditional religion (“crush the infamous”, said Voltaire).

All forms of individual moral behaviour that were previously forbidden by the Church in the name of religion are now permitted. I would like to emphasise an important point: defenders of the previous order see their moral order disappearing and speak of nihilism. But with a few exceptions, this is not nihilism. It is the replacement of community morality with individual morality, still according to the same principles. For example: abortion is now permitted, but paedophilia (the existence of which was previously hushed up to protect communities) is criminalised. Or again: assisted suicide is permitted, but rape, which was so easily tolerated, is criminalised. In other words: the individual is protected on all sides from institutions, immune from the excesses of institutions. As this is a morality of progress that seeks to transcend human limitations, there is sometimes a touch of nihilism in this post-Christian morality: for example, transgenderism is a form of nihilism (because it involves imaginatively denying the distinction between the sexes, which is an anthropological given). As it is always a question of devaluing communities in the name of the individual,



this evolution transforms not only morality but also politics: national identity is denied in the face of immigration, which has become an inalienable human right.

The historical phenomenon is well known: when a religion collapses, morality takes its place and takes on a religious aspect. The traditional Christian religion of Western countries, in the midst of collapse, is being replaced by this post-Christian morality, which literally plays the role of a religion in terms of faith, application and also intolerance. The big difference with the previous situation is that there is no longer a consensus on moral issues: some groups would like to preserve the old morality, some are undecided, and the supporters of the new morality consider it to be an irreducible, non-negotiable achievement. For the first time in 16 centuries, there is no longer a *modus vivendi* on moral issues; our societies are home to several different moral codes that are at war with each other.

Now that the traditional Church, now a minority, and the clergy who represent it no longer have the authority to define morality, it is the states that determine the common morality (as was the case before Judeo-Christianity). We now find ourselves in the West, and this evolution has taken place in just a few decades, with governments imposing a common post-Christian morality that has become a state religion (since it is decreed by state laws: it is the National Assembly that decides whether euthanasia is legitimate or not, whether paedophilia is a crime or not). We might ask: since there is no longer a moral consensus, how will the state decide which moral laws to enact? States are setting up “ethics committees” comprising a representative of each religion or school of thought (in France: a Catholic, a Protestant, an Orthodox Christian, a Jew, an atheist, a Freemason, etc.). And ultimately, it is the majority that dictates morality. Even if it often happens that active and articulate minority groups impose extreme, even nihilistic, moral concepts on states.

Post-Christian morality is militant and fanatical, it does not tolerate debate and in most cases it is even forbidden to debate it (what is known in France as the “offence of obstruction”: it is a crime to question state morality through contradiction and debate, for example by trying to convince a young woman not to have an abortion). This new moral-religion is initiated by very militant and fanatical groups, which resemble all sectarian groups in their early days (Christians in the first centuries imposed themselves in this way). They seize control of the political, economic and media elites, invade the public space and ostracise (bully on the internet) their opponents, with the result that no one dares to contradict them anymore. They are the counterparts of the early Marxist-Leninist groups, with one difference: they know that they can no longer use terror to govern, only ostracism (Tocqueville accurately predicted these situations in

future democracies). At the same time, they can only exist thanks to an increasingly permissive public opinion that no longer accepts the slightest prohibition or intolerance. Ultimately, states define and enforce the laws of post-Christian liberal-libertarian morality.

But something new is happening. This morality, which functions like a religion (it has the fervour, faith and intolerance of one), is becoming more important than anything else: it is supplanting the will of the people = it is supplanting democracy. Any popular sovereignty that seeks to challenge it is ostracised and considered undemocratic. It is becoming the true democratic criterion, since it is a state morality. This is why Western countries now consider that democracy is defined by the acceptance and adoption of “same-sex marriage” and no longer by the will of the people. Hungary is considered by European institutions to be a non-democracy because it constitutionalises marriage as a contract between a man and a woman, even though it was popular sovereignty that decided this. For the second time in a century (after Marxism), a largely utopian school of thought, stemming from the



## “European leaders now only trust technocracy and expert government, the quest for a ‘technical government’.

Enlightenment, has come up against Tocquevillian democracy and, armed with plenipotentiary certainty, is challenging popular sovereignty. For the second time, power is being confiscated by a minority movement in the name of Progress. The many citizens who do not wish to be listed on administrative forms as ‘parent 1 and parent 2’ but wish to remain ‘father and mother’, the many citizens who do not want their nursery school children to be offered a change of sex, these citizens cannot express themselves and when they do, they are ridiculed by the media. They are in the majority, but popular sovereignty no longer has any meaning. Peoples who want to reclaim popular sovereignty against the post-Christian dogma must give themselves leaders who are unapologetic and unapologetic, ready to defy all the taboos of conformist thinking: that is Trump.

Let us understand this decisive turning point. In Western legal traditions, the concept of the rule of law refers to a method of government: respect for the law by those in power – it is a matter of escaping the arbitrariness of the ruler. The “rule of law” does not refer to a specific programmatic or moral content. The evolution of the European institution since the end of the 20th century represents a turning point in this regard – the rule of law now refers to the application of the new liberal morality, summarised by J.E. Schoettl as follows: “primacy of subjective rights, individual feelings and the private sphere over collective demands, abolition of borders, substitution of citizen initiatives for universal suffrage and of judges for legislators, radical environmentalism, exaltation of minority rights (sexual, ethnic, linguistic or religious), desire to ‘deconstruct’ relationships of domination (colonial,

patriarchal, etc.) that are supposed to structure society” . The European institution, without debate, sees itself as having a mission to impose this post-modern ideology.

### Conclusion

A phenomenon is occurring that the leaders of institutional Europe do not want to take into account: at the end of the previous century, many of us European citizens believed in Europe as a new homeland. Not a homeland that replaced the other (one does not change one’s homeland like one changes one’s shirt!), but one that superimposed itself on the other to protect it in a maternal and welcome way. Today, many of us, literally sickened by Brussels ideology, by this combination of a billion daily standards and a sovereign incapacity (i.e. exactly the opposite of what is needed), are showing their disenchantment and abandoning the European dream. The situation is different in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which are fighting this disenchantment with all their might and refusing to listen to criticism: for them, the European dream often represents an ideal, or what Rob Henderson calls a luxury belief. But it is clear that everywhere, in both the East and the West, the rise of so-called populist or illiberal movements reflects a rejection and anger at the way in which such a beautiful idea has been squandered, transformed into a war machine for post-modern bobos.

Subsidiarity and democracy are both based on the idea of capable, free and responsible individuals. This idea is characteristic of our culture: it does not exist elsewhere. It is not found among the Chinese, the Indians or the Muslims. By rejecting personal, local, regional and national autonomy (through the empire of standards) and by rejecting democracy (through technocratic and ideological despotism), institutional Europe is severely undermining its founding culture. ▀

\* Note by Jean-Éric Schoettl, State Councillor (retired), Secretary General of the Constitutional Council from 1997 to 2000, member of the Scientific Council of the Res Publica Foundation.



**Chantal Delsol**

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Celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Margaret Thatcher have been taking place in many countries. People who knew her and worked with her have shared their reminiscences. Policy analysts have commented upon what aspects of her legacy have lasted and what aspects have not. This discussion has taken place on both the Right and the Left of politics. The Left, of course, hoped that after she was removed from power in 1990 nothing more would be heard of her, except reheated outrage at the alleged unfairness and destructiveness of her years in power. They have been disappointed.

On the Right, the discussion, albeit polite and respectful, is also often critical. The New Right – an umbrella term which covers different parties and movements which do not always agree with each other – distrusts the Reagan-Thatcher free market economics. It regrets the deindustrialisation which (it is said) is the result of her refusal to pursue an interventionist economic strategy. It sees the loss of social cohesiveness of the 1980s as too high a price to pay for economic advance. It connects Thatcher and Reagan with the disastrous wars fought in the Middle East to establish a liberal order where no such order is possible. It regards the transfer of power to global

authorities as the counterpart of Reagan's and Thatcher's promotion of international open trade. These debates also, in their way, and paradoxically, confirm just how central Margaret Thatcher's role at home and abroad was.

It is worth trying to clarify what Margaret Thatcher had to do, wanted to do and, in large part, succeeded in doing. Mrs Thatcher had a philosophy and a strategy. She was a believer in what Hayek calls the spontaneous order of a free society. The outcome could not be imposed, but it could be enabled. The work of government was to create a framework of sound money, stable prices, limited borrowing, low taxes, and light regulation. It was to help those who genuinely could not help themselves, without encouraging the scourge of dependence. It was to keep the country and all British territory safe from

external threats, and to prevent and repress crime

The criticism which can be made of all this – which you could call classical liberalism in a conservative form – is that it was too liberal and not conservative enough. Looking back, from today's social collapse in the West, we can admit that both Thatcher and Reagan were overconfident that values and culture would look after themselves. But that is where the criticism should end. Mrs Thatcher and Ronald Reagan never for a millisecond thought faith, family and tradition were unimportant. Ronald Reagan never fought wars around the world to impose liberal values in the name of a "New World Order". Reagan carried the biggest of sticks, but he hardly ever used it.

Turning again to Thatcher, the only war that she fought was one that she never wished for or expected. It was a war to

**“ It is worth trying to clarify what Margaret Thatcher had to do, wanted to do and, in large part, succeeded in doing. ”**

**Robin Harris**

# THE THATCHER ERA

reverse aggression by Argentina. British victory in the Falklands was the result of her resolve and the prowess of the British armed forces, especially the navy. The aftermath brought many benefits for Britain's standing in the world. None of them, however, was the result of Margaret Thatcher's bellicosity. Perhaps the single greatest destabilising force that now afflicts Western countries is mass immigration from outside the West. Immigration was already an issue in the 1970s in Britain, though the levels then look trivial beside what is happening today. Margaret Thatcher was harshly criticised while Leader of the Opposition for claiming that people felt "rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture". In Government, she imposed tight controls. Only about 50,000 immigrants a year entered and net immigration during her time was zero.

Most of Mrs. Thatcher's time in government was spent on the economy. It had to be, because of the dreadful condition the British economy was in. But she did not believe that economics was everything. She passionately believed in British greatness. She knew that there was no other way to "make Britain great again" – to coin a phrase – than to sort out the finances and achieve economic growth.

What can be called "declinism" was the dominant mood among the political elite. Britain was derisively called "the sick man of Europe". The so-called "British disease" undermined the country's sense of self-worth and threatened

confidence in the Western model of free enterprise and democracy. That model, too, we should recall, was under attack in the 1970s. Britain's decline thus seemed to mirror that of the West. Margaret Thatcher's approach consisted of the wholesale reversal of socialism in all its forms. While the timing of measures had to be flexible, the overall direction was always fixed. The scale of the obstacles was huge. It was thought that no one could run the country without trade union agreement. It was said that no one would want to buy state owned industries. It was asserted that inflation and pay could not be kept down

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without controls – what was called an incomes policy. The underlying, pervasive and highly dangerous attitude was that nothing could be done. Mrs. Thatcher was temperamentally incapable of settling for that. She despised what she saw as a culture of excuses.

The first Thatcher term of government concentrated on squeezing out inflation and restoring the public finances, while removing controls on pay, prices, dividends and, most dramatically, exchange controls. The second and third terms saw fundamental tax reform – including much lower marginal rates at the top end, which led to more, not less, tax paid by the wealthy. That period also saw a programme of

privatisation – more than forty businesses sold, and a reduction of the state share of industry of 60 percent. The trade unions were brought within the rule of law and industrial relations were reshaped. Unemployment, which at one point trebled, fell sharply. The share of GDP taken by government also fell as growth resumed. Public debt was repaid. Although, over the whole period, tax rose, because of the need to cut inherited borrowing, marginal income tax rates fell at crucial points in the income distribution. The overall marginal tax rate of the average worker dropped by two points, and that of the top earner by 35 points. The effect of these changes was to reward work and success. This concentration on incentives generated profit and attracted investment, which was then used productively – because labour practices had been reformed.

The obvious measure of a country's economic performance is the growth of its GDP. Here Mrs Thatcher's achievement is not in doubt. Comparing economic cycle with economic cycle, between 1973 and 1979 – before she took office – Britain's (non-oil) GDP grew by less than one percent a year, but in the 1980s it grew by 2.25 per cent a year. This was contrary to the international trend. The OECD countries – that is the most developed countries – experienced no improvement in growth during that period. The contrast would become still more marked after Mrs Thatcher left office, when the structural changes she had made largely remained in place. At the root of that improvement was the



growth of productivity. During the Thatcher years British productivity saw both absolute and relative improvement. Using the measure of total factor productivity (that is the productivity of all inputs in producing the business sector's added value) Britain's performance was transformed. Between the periods 1960-1973 and 1979 and 1994 Britain leaped from twelfth to fifth place in the league of OECD nations.

The reversal of economic decline and the restoration of Britain's prosperity contributed to a transformation in Britain's international standing. A sound economy not only allowed the Falklands War to be fought and won with no tax increases or interest rate hikes. It paid for the updating of the nuclear deterrent and for the level of military commitment which was required to win the Cold War. Much of this legacy has now been lost. The last Conservative Government abandoned control of immigration, massively increased spending and borrowing, and raised the level of taxation to the highest level for seventy years. Any proof that the Thatcher approach is quite good at winning elections – and she never lost one – is surely superfluous, now that a Conservative Government, pursuing the opposite approach, has suffered the worst election defeat in the Party's history and perhaps terminally destroyed the Party's reputation.

This analysis of the principles and policies that Margaret Thatcher pursued in her three terms as Prime Minister would be lacking an essential factor if one failed to discuss her character. The writer of this article got to know her well over many years of intense work and

enjoyable though never frivolous companionship, in and out of office, during the good and later the bad years of frailty towards the end of her life. (She effectively withdrew from public affairs in 2002, though she emerged from time to time, as she did to launch *New Direction* in 2009 as the intellectual hub of European conservatism).

Mrs. Thatcher's character was at one level simple, at another – and when you looked deeper – complicated. She was very clever though not an intellectual and she did not pretend to be. But she liked the company of thinkers. She had an extraordinary head for figures, which she used to instill fear in Ministers who tried to argue with her about matters like public expenditure or welfare.

She could be very charming, and she was much more widely loved than anyone reading the accounts would imagine. She was personally kind, particularly to people of no social importance. She was financially generous too. But she could be – and sometimes was, quite deliberately I think – “difficult”. It kept people on their toes. Her anger, when it came, was like an electric storm, and her temper, when it broke, was volcanic. This reflected a kind of exaggeration in her personality which may be inseparable from those who dominate by force of character, as she did. Though physically petite, she was a life-force, and even in old age, as the saying goes, “she filled a room”. The truth is that many were afraid of her. She probably underrated the resentment – even hatred – which her fierceness, sometimes attended by a touch of cruelty, generated among male colleagues. Some men cannot work for a woman at all, and quite a few more can

only do so if the woman behaves like a man, which Mrs. Thatcher did not.

Mrs Thatcher was always taken with the idea of Virtue – she always talked about virtues, not values – including the “Victorian Virtues”. One of the best analyses of her as a politician is Shirley Letwin's *Anatomy of Thatcherism*. In this book Letwin ascribes to Mrs Thatcher what she calls the “vigorous vir-

temperance, justice and fortitude (courage). They provide a useful checklist against which to assess her outlook and approach.

Prudence, which sounds dull and a bit prim, is best understood as practical wisdom or common sense. This Mrs Thatcher had aplenty. Her common sense was reflected in the way in which she could separate big issues from lesser ones. It



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tues” and which she lists as “uprightness, self-sufficiency, energy, independent mindedness, adventurousness, loyalty and robustness”. These were exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's own life. After leaving office, I fancy by reading pieces by the American theologian Michael Novak, she came across the four so-called Cardinal – that is “hinge” – virtues, according to which the ancients judged behaviour – namely, prudence,

also showed in her instinct for timing. For example, she knew just when to fight and when to reach a compromise with the European Common Market in the early 1980s in getting back what she called “our money” (going into the European budget). She, of course, did not and could not determine the timing of most of the events in the thirteen-week military campaign in 1982 to recapture the Falklands. But when it came to the phases

of diplomacy and the time for the use of force, she judged matters to perfection. She proved a shrewd war leader.

Of hardly less importance was getting the timing right in the struggle with the overmighty trade unions. The Thatcher Government's “step by step” policy of trade union reform was to some extent a matter of smoke and mirrors, reflecting Government divisions not analysis. But in the crucial year-long struggle against the militant miners, who had destroyed one Conservative Government and were determined to destroy another – and free enterprise capitalism with it – strategy and tactics, pa-

of exercising iron self-discipline, was in her work. She discarded any pleasure, so that she could do her duty. She probably worked too hard. But without most of it she would have failed, because the system was often against her.

Thirdly, there is the virtue known as Justice. Here one must distinguish the personal from the public. She was just, in the sense of being honest and straightforward. She did not adopt airs and graces, and she had none of what is called “side”. Contrary to what is alleged, she was modest, even humble. Otherwise, she could not have learned so much and so quickly and from such un-

off when questions of fairness are raised. The Left who cannot or will not distinguish – no matter how often the difference is explained to them – between justice and equality would not have thought Mrs. Thatcher was at all interested in fairness either, but she was. She thought that people had a right to keep what they earned without the State taking it. She thought socialism was unjust. She believed that people should be enabled to fulfil their talents – a system which blocked that was inherently illegitimate.

The fourth and final Cardinal virtue is fortitude, or courage. This was certainly Mrs. Thatcher's pre-eminent moral quality. She was extraordinarily

## “Margaret Thatcher was what her country needed and what the West and indeed what the world needed.”

tience and boldness, above all timing, were vital. And Mrs Thatcher got it right. The defeat of that year long strike secured the Thatcher reforms and so permitted the industrial revival and prosperity of Britain.

The second Cardinal Virtue, temperance, might provoke a smirk a two because Mrs Thatcher was later thought to drink excessively. This as Prime Minister she certainly never did. After retirement she enjoyed an extra glass or two with Denis, and who can blame her? In any case, given her hero Churchill's consumption, and his achievements, the prudens have a poor case. Where Mrs Thatcher was temperate, in the proper sense

likely sources, as to make up for her early deficiencies. She used to say to advisers – “Don't worry – I have no toes”, i.e. don't hold back for fearing you will offend me. People thought that her frequent refusal to listen to political colleagues who disagreed was a sign of arrogance. But it was not. It was simply that she considered, often rightly and even in Cabinet, that she was in a small minority and she would never get the floor back if she yielded it.

She was also just, in that she believed strongly in fairness. This is quite unusual on the Right of politics. Conservative politicians usually believe in efficiency and order but are inclined to switch

brave. She was occasionally depressed and downhearted, but the mood did not last. Here we must distinguish moral from physical courage. Politicians always need the former, not so much the latter. If I were to list the decisions and events in Mrs. Thatcher's political life that required exemplary moral courage, I would suggest the following:

First, running for the leadership of the Conservative Party against Ted Heath in 1975 against all the odds, and against her own husband's advice, and winning. Second, insisting in 1981 on a deflationary budget at the depth of a recession to get the public finances under control, defending the decision,



**She effectively withdrew from public affairs in 2002, though she emerged from time to time, as she did to launch New Direction in 2009 as the intellectual hub of European conservatism.**

and sacking a large section of her Cabinet to drive it through. In the autumn of 1980, she famously told the Party Conference “the Lady is not for Turning” – now she proved it. Third, from start to finish, the Falklands War. Anyone who thinks that victory was inevitable knows nothing of logistics. Had a carrier been hit or a major troop ship been lost, her Cabinet would have overthrown her faster than they did Anthony Eden in 1956. It is doubtful whether any post-War British leader, except perhaps Churchill, would have sent the taskforce, let alone used it.

Mrs. Thatcher had not just moral, but physical courage. We should remember how keen the IRA (Irish Republican Army) terrorists were to kill Mrs. Thatcher and, of course, how many others they did kill. They came nearest with the bomb that wrecked the Grand Hotel, Brighton, in the early hours of

Friday 12 October 1984. Had she been in the bathroom of her suite, she would have been dead. Instead, she was working on her speech. She stayed completely calm. Her private secretary was appalled to see her, to the sound of falling masonry, walk back without hesitation into the darkened bedroom to check on her husband Denis. Her first thought was for others, and her second – by carrying on with the Conference – was to show that the terrorist would not win. Two of Mrs. Thatcher’s famous predecessors expressed thoughts about each other, which may appositely be applied to her. Lord Salisbury said of Benjamin Disraeli that “zeal for the greatness of England was the passion of his life”. Disraeli, reflecting on the qualities of Salisbury, observed that, “courage is the rarest of all qualities to be found in public men”. Mrs. Thatcher had both patriotic zeal and extraordinary courage.

Margaret Thatcher was what her country needed and what the West and indeed what the world needed. Whether, by providence, by luck, or by the even more impenetrable functioning of democracy, Britain obtained in her a leader with the right qualities to confront multiple crises.

She was a leader who changed the world and still, by her example, offers a model to all who would drive their countries forward along the path of greatness. →



**Robin Harris**

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THATCHER**  
AWARDS NIGHT

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