

Europe and the United States (May 31, 2003)

Abstract

This manifesto by French philosopher Jacques Derrida and German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas had special significance in the European debate on the Iraq war. The two noted that the unpopular war had made Europeans conscious of the failure of their common foreign policy. Europe, they argued, needed “to throw its weight on the scales” on the international level and in the UN “to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States.” The philosophers wanted those countries that advocated close European cooperation to play a leading role in forging a common foreign, security, and defense policies. Critics of the manifesto viewed it primarily as a call for deliberate separation from the United States. Others were critical of the fact that the intellectual debate on the Iraq war took place in Western European newspapers and failed to take Eastern European positions into account.

Source

February 15, or, What Binds Europeans Together:

Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe

It is the wish of Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas to be cosignatories of what is both an analysis and an appeal. They regard it as both necessary and urgent that French and German philosophers lift their voices together, whatever disagreements may have separated them in the past. The following text was composed by Jürgen Habermas, as will be readily apparent. Though he would have liked to very much, due to personal circumstances Jacques Derrida was unable to compose his own text. Nevertheless, he suggested to Jürgen Habermas that he be the co-signatory of this appeal, and shares its definitive premises and perspectives: the determination of new European political responsibilities beyond any Eurocentrism; the call for a renewed confirmation and effective transformation of international law and its institutions, in particular the UN; a new conception and a new praxis for the distribution of state authority, etc., according to the spirit, if not the precise sense, that refers back to the Kantian tradition. Moreover, many of Jürgen Habermas’s points intersect with ones Jacques Derrida has recently developed in his book, *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Galilée, 2002). Within several days, a book by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida will appear in the United States, consisting of two conversations which both of them held in New York after September 11, 2002.^[1] Despite all the obvious differences in their approaches and arguments, there too their views touch on the future of institutions of international law, and the new tasks for Europe.

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

During the leaden months prior to the outbreak of the war in Iraq, a morally obscene division of labor provoked strong emotions. The large-scale logistical operation of ceaseless military preparation and the hectic activity of humanitarian aid organizations meshed together as precisely as the teeth of a gear.

Moreover, the spectacle took place undisturbed before the eyes of the very population that – robbed of their own initiative – was to be victimized. [...]

A Common European Foreign Policy: Who First?

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

In Great Britain, while the special relationship with the United States is by no means uncontested, the priorities of Downing Street are still quite clear. And the Central and Eastern European countries, while certainly working hard for their admission into the EU, are nevertheless not yet ready to place limits on the sovereignty that they have so recently regained. The Iraq crisis was only a catalyst. In the Brussels constitutional convention, there is now a visible contrast between the nations that really want a stronger EU, and those with an *understandable* interest in freezing, or at best cosmetically changing, the existing mode of intergovernmental governance. This contradiction can no longer be finessed. The future constitution will grant us a European foreign minister. But what good is a new political office if governments don’t unify in a common policy? A Fischer with a changed job description would remain as powerless as Solana.^[2]

For the moment, only the core European nations are ready to endow the EU with certain qualities of a state. But what happens if these countries are able to agree only on a definition of ‘self-interest’? If Europe is not to fall apart, these countries will have to make use of the mechanisms for ‘strengthened cooperation’ mandated by the EU conference at Nice, as a way of taking a first step toward a common foreign policy, a common security policy, and a common defense policy. Only such a step will succeed in generating the momentum that other member-states – initially in the euro zone – will not be able to resist in the long run. In the framework of the future European constitution, there can and must be no separatism. Taking a leading role does not mean excluding. The avantgardist core of Europe must not wall itself off into a new ‘Small Europe.’ It must – as it has so often – be the locomotive. It is their own self-interest, to be sure, that will cause the more closely-cooperating member states of the EU to hold the door open. And the probability that the invited states will pass through that door will increase the more capable the core of Europe becomes in effective action externally, and the sooner it can prove that in a complex global society, it’s not just divisions that count, but also the soft power of negotiating agendas, relations, and economic advantages.

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

Political projects that aim at the further development of the EU are now colliding with the limits of the medium of administrative steering. Until now, the functional imperatives for the construction of a common market and the euro zone have driven reforms. These driving forces are now exhausted. A *transformative* politics, which would demand that member states not just overcome obstacles for

competitiveness, but form a common will, must connect with the motives and the attitudes of *the citizens themselves*. The legitimacy of majority decisions on highly consequential foreign policies has to rest on a basis of solidarity of out-voted minorities. But this presupposes a feeling of common political belonging on both sides. The population must so to speak 'build up' their national identities, and add to them a European dimension. What is already a fairly abstract form of civic solidarity, still largely confined to members of nation-states, must be extended to include the European citizens of other nations as well.

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

The Treacheries of a European Identity

It's easy to find unity without commitment. The image of a peaceful, cooperative Europe, open toward other cultures and capable of dialogue, floats like a mirage before all of us. We welcome the Europe that found exemplary solutions for two problems during the second half of the twentieth century. The EU already offers itself as a form of 'governance beyond the nation-state,' which could set a precedent in the post-national constellation. And for decades European social welfare systems served as a model. Certainly, they have now been thrown on the defensive at the level of the national state. Yet future political efforts at the domestication of global capitalism must not fall below the standards of social justice that they established. If Europe has solved two problems of this magnitude, why shouldn't it issue a further challenge: to defend and promote a cosmopolitan order on the basis of international law, against competing visions?

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

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

However, in reaction to the destructive power of this nationalism, values and habits have also developed which have given contemporary Europe, in its incomparably rich cultural diversity, its own face. This is how Europe at large presents itself to non-Europeans. A culture which for centuries has been beset more than any other culture by conflicts between town and country, sacred and secular authorities, by the competition between faith and knowledge, the struggle between states and antagonistic classes, has

had to painfully learn how differences can be communicated, contradictions institutionalized, and tensions stabilized. The acknowledgement of differences – the reciprocal acknowledgement of the Other in her otherness – can also become a feature of a common identity.

The pacification of class conflicts within the welfare state, and the self-limitation of state sovereignty in the framework of the EU, are only the most recent examples of this. In the third quarter of the twentieth century, Europe on this side of the Iron Curtain experienced its ‘golden age,’ as Eric Hobsbawm has called it. Since then, features of a common political mentality have taken shape, so that others often recognize us as Europeans rather than as Germans or French – and that happens not just in Hong Kong, but even in Tel Aviv. And isn’t it true? In European societies, secularization is relatively developed. Citizens here regard transgressions of the border between politics and religion with suspicion. Europeans have a relatively large amount of trust in the organizational and steering capacities of the state, while remaining sceptical toward the achievements of markets. They possess a keen sense of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’; they have no naively optimistic expectations about technological progress. They maintain a preference for the welfare state’s guarantees of social security and for regulations on the basis of solidarity. The threshold of tolerance for the use of force against persons is relatively low. The desire for a multilateral and legally regulated international order is connected with the hope for an effective global domestic policy, within the framework of a reformed United Nations.

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

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

Historical Roots of a Political Profile

In modern Europe, the relation between church and state developed differently on either side of the Pyrenees, differently north and south of the Alps, west and east of the Rhine. In different European countries, the idea of the state’s neutrality in relation to different world-views has assumed different legal forms. And yet within civil society, religion overall assumes a comparably un-political position. We may have cause to regret this social *privatization of faith* in other respects, but it has desirable consequences for our political culture. For us, a president who opens his daily business with public prayer, and associates his significant political decisions with a divine mission, is hard to imagine.

Civil society’s emancipation from the protection of an absolutist regime was not connected everywhere in Europe with the democratic appropriation and transformation of the modern administrative state. But the spread of the ideals of the French Revolution throughout Europe explains, among other things, why politics in both of its forms – as organizing power and as a medium for the institutionalization of political

liberty – has been welcomed in Europe. By contrast, the triumph of capitalism was bound up with sharp class conflicts, and this fact has hindered an equally positive appraisal of free markets. That differing evaluation of *politics* and *market* may explain Europeans' trust in the civilizing power of the state, and their expectations for its capacity to correct 'market failures.'

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

[1] The book has since appeared: Giovanna Borradori (ed.), *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[2] Javier Solana, formerly the Secretary General of NATO, is High Representative of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy – in effect the EU's foreign minister. Much criticism has been levelled at the evident lack of influence and political power invested in the office. Joschka Fischer, Germany's popular foreign minister, has been mentioned frequently as a candidate to head a new and presumably expanded EU foreign ministry, though Fischer himself has disavowed any such ambitions.

Source: Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, “February 15, Or, What Binds Europeans Together: Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe,” in *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War*. Verso: London and New York, 2005, pp. 4–12.

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