

Europe as a Community of Shared Values (December 28, 2005)

Abstract

According to historian Heinrich August Winkler, intensifying European integration meant more than just reforming institutions and decision-making processes. Advancing “Project Europe” also meant identifying with common values. The enlargement of the EU, Winkler explained, would reach its limits if questions of political culture were neglected. A good example of this, he observed, was the discussion of Turkey’s potential accession to the EU.

Source

An Overextended Sense of Community

As a community of shared values, the EU can only include countries that are unreservedly open to the political culture of the West.

Europe is in a state of profound crisis. Ever since the French rejected the European constitution in a referendum on May 29, 2005, and the Dutch did the same thing three days later, it has been clear that the treaty will not enter into force in its present form. With the common constitution, the European Union wanted to implement the reforms that are necessary for the community to remain functional after the admission of ten new members on May 1, 2004, and to remain capable of integrating additional new members.

On January 1, 2007, or at the beginning of 2008 at the very latest, Bulgaria and Romania are supposed to become EU members. On the night of October 3, 2005, accession negotiations with Turkey and Croatia began. The western Balkan states have been assured of the prospect of full membership at a later date. But how the institutions of the European Union are supposed to handle the accession of these countries remains entirely unclear.

The French and Dutch “no”-votes on the constitutional treaty were the expression of profound discontent with the way European politics [*Europapolitik*] has been practiced for a long time, namely, above the heads of the citizens. Fundamental decisions are made behind closed doors, without any prior discussion in the various national parliaments or the public sphere. Large segments of the population view the policies handed down by the European Commission in Brussels as alienated, lacking democratic legitimation, and effectively controlled by no one – least of all by the European Parliament. “Autocratic executive power”: this phrase coined by Karl Marx in 1852 in reference to the Bonapartist regime of Napoleon III offers a fitting description of the European Commission.

Lack of “belief in legitimacy” (Max Weber): this can describe the crisis facing the European integration process, but it cannot explain it. The most important cause of the present crisis is the gulf between enlarging and intensifying the European Union. In no other EU member state were the hopes for a convergence – or even a “pre-established harmony,” as [Gottfried] Leibniz would say – of enlargement and intensification as widespread as in Germany. The German illusion of convergence combined two other German illusions: the federalist and the postnational illusion.

Joschka Fischer still used the federalist illusion as his point of departure in his legendary “Humboldt speech” of May 12, 2000.^[1] He demanded “the transition from a union of states to full

parliamentarization as a European Federation,” “a European parliament and a European government that actually exercise legislative and executive power within the Federation.” This Federation would have to be based on a constitutional treaty. Above all, one thing remained from Fischer’s speech: the term “constitutional treaty.” But it was just the term and not what the German foreign minister understood it to mean. The mission of the EU constitutional convention would have profited more from a less misleading label.

The twin sister of the federalist illusion was the postnational illusion. The Germans destroyed their first nation-state, founded by Bismarck, on their own. After 1945, there was no arguing about that. But only a short time later, German politicians and journalists started making a virtue out of necessity. First, during the Adenauer era, it was Catholic conservatives who, referring to the supranational Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, claimed that Germans had a supranational mission. In 1956, the Bonn editor of the *Rheinische Merkur*, Paul Wilhelm Wenger, quoted a statement by Friedrich Gentz (who would later become the personal secretary of Austrian chancellor Prince Metternich) in the magazine *Neues Abendland*. The statement dated from 1806, the year marking the end of the Old Empire: “Europe has fallen because of Germany, and through Germany it must rise again.” Wenger’s lesson from history is: federalism instead of nation-states. He viewed the internal federalization of Germany as the “prerequisite for the only possible solution to the German question through the federalist integration of Germany with all of its neighbors.”

In the following decades, the idea of a German alternative to the nation-state gradually wandered from the right across the political center to the left. In 1976, Karl Dietrich Bracher, a contemporary historian in Bonn, referred to the Federal Republic as a “postnational democracy among nation-states” for the first time. It was a term that rose to prominence when the author repeated it in the fifth volume of *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [The History of the Federal Republic of Germany] in 1986.

Two years later, Oskar Lafontaine, then minister president of the federal state of Saarland and deputy chairman of the SPD, announced in his book *Die Gesellschaft der Zukunft* [The Society of the Future] that precisely because the Germans had had “the worst experiences with a perverted nationalism,” they were “virtually predestined to become a driving force in the process of the supranational integration of Europe.”

Predestination due to perversion: outside of the Federal Republic hardly anyone was inclined to applaud this bold dialectic about-face, a variation of the early Christian doctrine of *felix culpa*, the fortunate fall. The idea of merging the nation-states in Europe and declaring a postnational age was in fact just as apolitical as it was ahistorical. Historian Hermann Heimpel once remarked that “The fact that there are nations is, historically speaking, what’s European about Europe.” Perhaps one could put it better this way: the diversity of its nations is one of Europe’s most important characteristics. Consequently, it cannot be the goal of the European Union to overcome nations. It can only build arches over them.

The European Constitution was intended as a means of intensifying the process of integration. This means is no longer available, but the end goal remains. No matter what takes the place of the Constitution, further intensification will require much more than more effective institutions and more transparent development processes. Intensification can only be achieved if Europeans develop a clear awareness of what they can build upon and what they need to leave behind. There are common experiences and impressions that go much further back in history than most Europeans and many of their politicians are aware. The project of European integration will only succeed if it is supported by a sense of community: the recognition of a common bond and solidarity.

A Political Union that aims to speak with a single voice on important issues would have to get serious about the maxim, grandiosely proclaimed time and again, that the EU is not just a partnership of convenience but a community of shared values. A European Union that wishes to be a Political Union

would have to answer the question that necessarily arises from its description of itself as a community of shared values: What are the values of the EU? Are they European, Western, or universal values?

The term “European values” poses a problem. The term pertains to Europe and its borders. The question of Europe’s borders can be answered either positivistically or politically. The positivistic answer is the geographic one, which places Europe between the Atlantic and the Ural Mountains. The political answer focuses on political culture, the sum of the written and unwritten laws that influence political decision-making processes. The geographic Europe does not have a common political culture. If we speak, nonetheless, of a shared political culture with regard to European integration, then we mean Western political culture.

It is important to distinguish between the terms “Europe” and “the West.” To quote Viennese historian Gerald Stourzh, “Europe (alone) is not the West. The West extends beyond Europe. But Europe also extends beyond the West.”

It is indisputable that the major Anglo-Saxon-influenced democracies of North America, Australia, and New Zealand are part of the West. Major parts of Europe are not. The West: that was originally that portion of Christianity that had its spiritual center in Rome until the Reformation. When we in the Europe of the EU talk about “European identity,” then we are referring, whether we are aware of it or not, to the identity of the European Occident.

This identity can be grasped with our senses. One need only think of the great epochs in the history of sacral and secular architecture, the fine arts, and music. Europeans have so much in common culturally that it would make no sense at all to write a purely national history of art. But the commonalities are not limited to the arts. There are common legal traditions, from church law to the reception of Roman law to the *jus publicum europaeum* after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Europeans have also gone through the same emancipation processes: from humanism and the Reformation to the Enlightenment to the development of the rule of law and democracy. Finally, there is the integrating force of commemorating the murderous consequences of hatred toward foreigners and minorities, of nationalism and racism – with the Holocaust as its most extreme culmination.

An enlightened European sense of community can only be based both on an awareness of what has, for better or worse, united Europe for more than a millennium, and on the memory of what has separated Europeans for centuries. Roughly forty years after the end of the Third Reich, the “historians’ quarrel” [*Historikerstreit*] about the singularity of the Nazi murder of the Jews was fought out in the “old” Federal Republic of Germany. In this context, Jürgen Habermas made the following, oft-quoted statement in 1986: “The unreserved opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the major intellectual accomplishment of the postwar era, of which my generation in particular can be proud.”^[2] Unreserved opening to the political culture of the West: This phrase also includes an answer to the question regarding the political boundaries of Europe and thus the limits to the “enlargability” of the European Union. As a political community of shared values, the EU can only include countries that have unreservedly opened up to the political culture of the West. Countries that do not wish to adopt this culture therefore reject the EU as a community of shared values and cannot become members.

The eight Eastern and Central European countries that were under Communist rule until the events of 1989/91 brought an end to that era, and which have been members of the EU since May 1, 2004, belong, without exception, to the historical West. The division of Europe in 1945, represented by the name Yalta, was a division that ran counter to history. For this reason, none of the new EU member states has any fundamental problem with declaring a commitment to the political culture of the West.

This statement does not mean that European countries that were not historically part of the Occident cannot become members of the EU. Greece, with its Orthodox tradition, has been a member of the

European Union since 1981. Its opening up to the political culture of the West began in the nineteenth century. Two other countries influenced by the Orthodox Church, Bulgaria and Romania, are supposed to join the EU in 2007. But the question remains whether the EU has interpreted the political criteria for accession (declared in 1993 in Copenhagen) too technocratically and positivistically and has neglected the question of political culture in its negotiations with candidates to date.

This also pertains to the most controversial candidate for EU membership: Turkey. This controversy would not exist if Turkey had opened up unreservedly to the political culture of the West. Then the geographic objection (i.e. that the country is predominantly located in Asia), would have been irrelevant. Turkey is actually partially Westernized, both from a geographical and a political perspective. On top of the economic and cultural East-West gap comes the fact that, while Turkey has indeed adopted numerous Western legal codes, it still has great difficulty accepting what we have called “the spirit of the law” since Montesquieu. The obstinate denial of the genocide committed against the Armenians cannot be reconciled with the political culture of the West. The European Commission and the European Council, that is, the governments of the member states, have systematically ignored this point to this day (in contrast to many national parliaments and the European Parliament). The treatment of the issue of the Armenian genocide will – must – be raised in the accession talks.

It is uncertain whether the drawn-out negotiation process will lead to Turkey’s admission in the end. Failure would be a debacle for all involved. For just this reason, sooner or later, someone should start thinking about constructive alternatives to full membership. “Privileged partnership” is the term I proposed for such an alternative on November 7, 2002, in an article for *Die Zeit*. Either way, should the talks or the ratification process fail, it must not lead to a rupture in European-Turkish relations.

“Project Europe” has a normative and historical foundation: that foundation consists of Western values and the political culture that emerged from them. Thus, the European Union cannot develop its identity in opposition to a country that has had as crucial an influence on the political culture of the West as the United States. There will always be occasion for disputes between Europe and the United States concerning interpretations of Western values – and certainly disputes about current government policies on both sides of the Atlantic. But a glance at non-Western societies is enough to realize that the commonalities between America and Europe far outweigh their differences.

[...]

If Western values and the political culture of the West are – and must be – constitutive of a European sense of community, then it is also obvious at which point one must start talking about the overextension of the European Union. The EU enters the phase of overextension when it encompasses large regions that have not yet embraced the political culture of the West and where there is no basis for a felt European community. At the moment, it is hard to imagine a community stretching from Lapland to Kurdistan. Many great empires have fallen due to overextension. But history can offer no example of a great power that was created through it.

[...]

Though some of them might be in denial, the members of the EU are no longer classical nation-states. They are post-classical nation-states that exercise part of their sovereignty jointly or have transferred it to EU institutions. If they want to maintain the goal of a Political Union, they need to know what unites and binds them. Parties, parliaments, and governments can promote the emergence and strengthening of this awareness.

The decisive effort, however, must come from the civil societies and namely from intellectuals. Only when politics and society face this challenge will the words uttered by former chancellor Willy Brandt on

November 10, 1989, one day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, become a reality. He expressly wanted his words to be understood in reference not only to Germany but to Europe as a whole when he said: “What belongs together now grows together.”

[*This is an abridged version of a talk given by the author on November 10, 2005, at the Robert Bosch Foundation in Stuttgart.*]

NOTES

[1] See document 6 in this chapter – eds.

[2] Habermas, “Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung,” first published in *Die Zeit* (July 11, 1986). Published in English as “A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing” in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, ed. and trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 34–44.

Source: Heinrich August Winkler, “Überdehntes Wir-Gefühl”, *Die Welt*, no. 303/2005, December 28, 2005, p. 25.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Europe as a Community of Shared Values (December 28, 2005), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3751>> [June 16, 2026].