Europe is the Future, America the Past

by
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Allow me first to introduce myself. I am an old Alsatian European married to a Bostonian for more than 40 years. We lived for 10 years in Washington, D.C. and for 30 in Brussels. Alsatians have suffered under both the French and the Prussians; we are Europeans. Many of the educated Alsatians have married foreigners and therefore know Americans inside and out. The old ones among us are still Catholics, deeply attached to Vatican II, which we old Catholics helped to prepare. We never were “Roman Catholic” but always looked forward to world liturgies expressing the One Faith in different cultures. So as an old Catholic American-Brussels Eurocrat, I may be able to express some European views that have not yet been fully articulated in formal discussions.

Many people in the United States who look at Europe try to figure out what it will take for Europe to become a single united state like the U.S.A. They wonder when nationalist France will quit holding back other obsolete nation-states from becoming part of a new European state that the old continent needs if it is to survive in the 21st century. Most Europeans agree with this view, though they are tired of their politicians arguing that such a Europe will arise only from a gradual, progressive process that accommodates their politics.

America and Europe

If we take a closer look, however, all of this is nonsense, because it is based on an incredibly mistaken analysis of the future and the past. Europe and the U.S. represent two radically different worlds. The centralized American federation, with its homogeneous individualistic people is not the future; instead, it is the product of the old European nation-state ideal.
America solved the problems of Europe’s 18th-century moral philosophers and 19th-century economic developments by transforming European immigrants into Anglo-Saxon pragmatists. America, in this sense, represents Europe’s past success. But Europe today, with its multicultural societies, its personalist-communitarian future, and its awareness of the need to help shape a global society shared by different and sometimes dangerous peoples, is confronted with a complex future. As a consequence, Europe and America exist as antipodes to one another, more so than Europe and Latin America.

The American system is well known and has been studied in great detail. Its basic model corresponds to that of an old European state, such as England; but it is now a hyper-state, strong and well organized. It also bears the difficult responsibilities of a global superpower, a responsibility that was familiar to past imperial powers—Great Britain, France, and Spain. By contrast, Europe today represents the dim, not-yet-realized future. It is the “new world” in contrast to the solid past of America.

So, what is the European future? First, it is composed of many small regions or provincial areas—from Finland to Sicily—each with a different language or dialect, different churches and histories, each more or less Protestant or more or less Catholic, each more or less social-liberal or socialist-libertarian. All the old European nation-states, from Spain to Italy, from England to France, are on their way out. Education and cultural vitality are moving to the provinces while foreign policy is moving to Brussels. None of the provinces, old or new, can provide security in a nuclear world, but each is increasingly able to offer meaningful public community—the kind of community that carries forward its culture and historical memory through education and a shared life. The “we” that has been lost by Americans “bowling alone” is alive and kicking in Europe’s provincial communities.

These provincial, not local, cultures are quite diverse, some smaller, others larger, yet they share in a common past—the great culture and ethos of Europe that was shaped by Christian faith, Enlightenment religion, democracy, and a market economic system. Their fundamental values in that sense are the same. Women have always been considered equal to men and basically different from men. Old libertarian Danes no less than rigorous Frenchmen and conservative Spaniards want women to have the freedom not to wear veils in public. These diverse Europeans may have different views of beauty, but they are all keen to develop it further.

Provincialism and Transnationalism

Provincial European cultural groups have all interacted in the past and continue to cultivate amusing shibboleths about one another. In recent generations they have been interacting more and more, often living close to one another, even vacationing together. They know they are not identical with each other, yet they also know they are part of a single Europe that is different from America, the Middle East, and Africa.
However different the provincial cultures are, they know deep in their bones that this one Europe—the continental union (European Union, EU) now being constructed as an overarching mechanism—is absolutely necessary to their survival. They hate the idea but are resolved to accept the fact that they must produce a new kind of governing mechanism that will be able to defend them against others, reduce pollution, and ensure an effective market with adequate social and health protection. No one wants the American healthcare system or the costs borne by individuals to obtain an American higher education. They all know they need a single market, a common system of defense, and a united effort to promote a healthier global environment. Unlike the Americans on their island, Europeans live in the middle of the world.

Unity with Diversity

Going even further, Europeans with all their diversity, realize that the EU must go deeper into the making of a European commons. It will not be enough merely to defend a void. Europeans need a social system that promotes their fundamental cultural diversity, a type of society that nurtures a deep understanding of both unity and diversity. Europeans do not want a homogenous American kind of unity that is built on individualism without diverse communities.

Europeans are thus on their way to a new kind of culture, one capable of real intellectual creativity and not merely digital, quantitative progress in a few sciences, technologies, and products. Europeans want cultural progress that spawns new and different views and not only more things. In fact, Europe has no choice but to shape a new order, because it is subject to two basic constraints.

First, Europe has no alternative but to build a means of common defense against potential dangers on the horizon and to ensure its environmental survival. Thus, we need the machinery of a very modern state with efficient means of Europe-wide democratic accountability. This is a very difficult thing to achieve. But, secondly, we need to strengthen our cultural diversity at the same time. We have no option to leave that behind, for we cannot discard our distinct cultural identities. Thus, we must press forward with the invention of a distinctly European multicultural personalism based on provincial powers of education and cultural development. Doing this at the same time that we build a European union may prove to be an even more difficult task.

Over against American individualist homogeneity, Europeans must build a confederal culture and we must do so right in the middle of the Arab-African cultures around us and now within us. We have time to achieve this goal, though not too much time. Unlike the United States, Europe is not a global power in charge of the present decaying world system. Yet we still must face an immediate and urgent challenge: how can we defend our future in the world while taking distance from the U.S., to which we are historically linked, without endangering our own relative position in the global power system?
Parting of the Ways?

The future of Europe or of any part of the world will not be secured easily. It will have to be built with care. But Europeans are in the place and at a time when creativity is both possible and necessary. I fear that Americans are facing decline because they don’t know that they are the past—that their time is passing.

In recent weeks, American leaders announced that they will not be able to maintain their troop levels in Iraq after the summer of 2008. Their armed forces are about as prepared for the new world of conflict as French tanks were prepared for World War II. The American people are about as ready to defend their future in the Middle East as the French people were prepared to defend theirs in Czechoslovakia in 1938. And the whole world now knows that America’s material and social infrastructures—from water supplies to bridges, from healthcare to secondary education—are in worse condition than their armed forces.

In 1939, the French, expressing themselves through a self-mocking song, were more clairvoyant than the Americans are in 2007. The French kept hearing the song broadcast on their radio stations: “Tout va tres bien Mme la Marquise” [Everything is fine, Madame Marquise]. Madame Marquise asks her gardener, “How is everything?” and the gardener responds, “Tout va tres bien Mme la Marquise, but your dog died.” She calls back and asks what happened, and the gardener says, “Tout va tres bien Mme la Marquise, the stable burned down . . . The house burned down . . . . Your husband committed suicide . . . . There has been a bankruptcy . . . . But, Tout va tres bien Mme la Marquise.”

Yet, perhaps there is something new on the horizon for a European and American convergence. I was relieved to hear France’s new foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, speak in mid-September of France’s willingness to take tough action against Iran if it persists in trying to become a nuclear power in the Middle East. This suggests that France’s new president, Nicolas Sarkozy, may be inviting Europe and the United States to transform NATO into a truly joint enterprise instead of maintaining the illusion of the old American umbrella over Europe. Not only could this reestablish the credibility of the North Atlantic alliance as a responsible contributor to international order, but it could also compel Europe to become responsible for its own security and to realize its underlying European identity within the Western ethos.

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