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West Facing East Facing West

For a long time now discussions on European identity have been deeply embedded in political discourses of the old continent. It has often been said that Europe has always been the idea present in the minds of the enlightened Europeans (not to mention rulers of holy empires), and that the present process of integration is only a natural realisation of a spiritual condition called European culture. Leaving alone the question whether it makes sense to speak of European culture in the times when the classical model of education has largely gone out of use, we nevertheless have to have a closer look at the origin of our contemporary situation and ask ourselves the uneasy question whether the Europe we are talking about here, the Europe of the last fifty years, the post-war Europe of market economy and post-colonial nostalgia has been, in fact, European at all.

In the most spectacular of senses, it has not, and here probably lies the origin of the problems the European Union has with the application of this unwieldy term “Europe”. For half of the century, it only named a relatively small part of what is geographically considered as the continent of Europe – “Europe” meant the west (and partly south) of it, whereas terms such as “Eastern Europe” were used basically as polite euphemisms. Such Europe emerged from the war as divided as it ever had been, and public conciliatory gestures were rather the expressions of exhaustion than any will to think about

the common future¹. Yet, there was something new in this situation, something that challenged the old European loyalties and animosities – there appeared a limit against which all democratic European countries could measure themselves against and, by doing that, identify themselves anew. The “iron curtain” was something which every country had to include in its reckoning. No unity existed in Europe, yet there was a limit common to everybody, the limit which was not just a geographically placed border line, but a threat each European country took to be its own, no matter whether it directly adjoined the East or not. And this limit was not of European making – Europe was provided with it by the two forces, which throughout their histories had, although in a very different way, rather uneasy relations with Europe. It was generally the United States Army that liberated western Europe, and, later on, established its military presence there with the creation of NATO, so Europe got itself back from a “foreign” hand, and got itself back not as particular countries, but as a relatively undifferentiated region of the world seen from Washington as its outpost against the USSR and its block. It was Stalin and Roosevelt, not Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer, who laid foundations for the identification of the post-war Europe. And the presence of Winston Churchill at Jalta only makes such conclusion more obvious, him being a representative of two seemingly contradictory attitudes at the same time: on the one hand, of the perennial British “balance of power” politics, of which the trans-Atlantic British-American proximity is only a historically developed form, but, on the other hand, of the “United States of Europe” idea that he started to preach when he ceased to be the Prime Minister. These two positions, although seemingly at odds, are actually rather continuous, since they, by means of establishing European identity with the help of the iron curtain as a common threat, end up speaking American English and with it identify Europe with American interests

¹ One exception was the popularity of the idea of the union of European countries in the late 1940s and early 50s in Germany. However, this “anomaly” can be very easily viewed as a particularly *German* discourse, since it allowed to skirt the difficult subject of German identity in the light of its recent past, and replace it with a clean slate of a European future.

as well – the only discourse that the iron curtain identity (which is another form of war identity) is able to utter is the language of confrontation between the two “empires”, and it does not matter which one is considered the evil one. Therefore, Europe, as far as it is Europe, that is, as far as it identifies itself as a certain common cause, adopts, consciously or unconsciously, the American identity, although in a half-shy and half-ashamed way². And it adopts it all the way, including the counter-discourses that the American discourse bred within itself, as the European 1968 only too well makes visible (a mirror discourse of world domination, which its professed anti-establishment originators conceived on the world scale, this time in revolutionary fashion). But how could such forging of a fake European identity have taken place so effortlessly?³ Why didn't the European heritage so often referred to in political declarations resist at all?

It is not difficult to answer these questions. Of course, one should not underestimate the fear of communism, yet there was something more to it than just panic in the face of foreign intervention in the matters of the “free world”. We have already mentioned that World War II brought about the end of a certain European image, which considered itself the idea of the continent, or rather the world: the infinity of Europe that constitutes the highest peak of humanity progressing towards fulfilment of its freedom by means of total mobilisation of power, and overcoming all obstacles on the way (obstacles being very often heritage of other cultures). Yet, the paradox (?) of history that Europe had to learn as it grew was that real power does not find its limit in another power greater than itself, but that its fate is to destroy itself by means of infinitising itself. The mobilised power, whose aim is infinite growth, when it can no longer

² Of course, there was always another possibility of choosing the opposite option, and many intellectuals fell for it. Yet, no matter how pathetic the choice of Soviet communism could have been, it was the choosing of another war identity founded by the iron curtain, and palmed off by a “foreign” hand, this time the Soviet propaganda.

³ The case of France, the most “anti-American” of European states, is a good example of the American discursive domination: to resist its discourse is only to emulate it (e.g. de Gaulle leaving NATO only in order to create his own independent nuclear arsenal).

spread in the form of conquest will find another outlet in which it can be spent. Since each society (at least a pre-mediatic one) has a limited ability to consume, so the power will not be canalised in production; instead, destruction will become the order of the day. The idea of infinity (of Europe) found its historical truth, that is, fulfilment as self-destruction by means of infinitisation⁴. The two world wars faced Europe with this knowledge and made it dumb. And when the tradition spoke, it either babbled in amnesia (“let us go back to our humanist roots”) or only did it to discredit itself – as the works of more acutely conscious authors, as e.g. Adorno, make clear – showing how the discourse of freedom is bound to murder. Therefore, Europe, when it identified itself at all, put its tradition under erasure and let the United States do the talking, fervently embracing its economic aims and popular culture. Yet, this was not an innocent gesture at all – it allowed two contradictory mind frames to be adopted at the same time. On the one hand, the experience of the painful limit (disavowal of infinitisation) is officially promulgated as the recent European profession of faith (the more or less peaceful deconstruction of empires was an exemplary sign of that). On the other hand, adoption of American discourse allows maintaining of a dear delusion: since the Soviet threat which grounds the common identification is understood as the world threat, Europe identifies itself on a grand scale of global politics, which might alleviate a bit the pains of diminished importance and power, the infinity of which came crashing down with the end of a certain European image that World War II annihilated. This way, the European identity of importance begins to shine with the reflected light, but one cannot avoid noticing that the light is quite uncanny, since the USA, as it has been known to us for the last fifty years, is in pursuit of infinite sovereignty and total mobilisation that necessarily goes with it – the same goals which Europe, at least officially, has put under erasure as the ones which had led to its destruction. Holding its tongue and avoiding confrontation of discourses allows Europe

⁴ And this is, of course, a perfect incarnation of the tragic scenario of ancient Greek *hubris* (another name for infinitisation) – the knowledge present at the moment of European origin.

to heal its imperial nostalgia in the reflected infinity it secretly adopts, and at the same time to maintain the “decent” image of itself.

The dismantling of the iron curtain, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin wall, is also the ruin of the European identity as conceived during the second half of the twentieth century. The event made clear the predicament Europe, the so-called united Europe, has to face. It has to ask itself the question avoided for so long out of fear both of the USSR and its own past (its own values that led to the hecatomb of the two world wars): can Europe keep identifying itself with total mobilisation (lately called globalisation), economic fundamentalism, and competition at all costs – all of which are the faces of the infinitising drive – and, therefore, pursue its political and economic interests above all else, taking the USA as its model?⁵

If the answer is affirmative, it would, in practice, lead to turning away from Eastern Europe, as any attempt at integration inevitably means sacrifice of the mobilised power, if only in the sense of spending funds in order to raise the East towards the material and legal standards of the West, without which no attempt at any kind of integration will ever succeed. However, the matter is much more serious than just the problem of economic “sacrifice”. Europe faces the task of redefining itself as Europe, since the recent limits which gave it measure ceased to exist, and the comfortable American crutch can no longer be of help, seeming more and more both artificial and disturbing⁶. As the result of it, Europe must define what it is, on the

⁵ The expansion of NATO towards the east in Europe would be a good example here – a pseudo-integration with the USA, based on the belated and utterly confused symbolic self-identification of the East against the non-existent iron curtain (that is, the Russian threat), opens a new territory and market for American military industry offering nothing but infinitising discourse in return (“you shall shine with our greatness”).

⁶ Of course, one can keep the old identification by means of “war on terrorism” doctrine, yet one cannot deny then the cynicism of such attitude, since – as the terrorists cannot be located precisely, they can hide anywhere – its aim is the formulation of a discourse that would authorise the USA to use force whenever and wherever it pleases. All of it obeys the old infinitising principle of absolute sovereignty, which always ends up as intervention abroad, although it is explained as defence of one’s own security.

one hand, against the eastern or Asian inability to function democratically (this is nothing new, most of the modern European discourse, including Marx, is defined by such limit), but also against the American pursuit of total mobilisation and infinitisation present in the values of economic fundamentalism (globalisation), which, in different historical circumstances of colonialism, had been Europe's own. Only in such a way can Europe actively and positively put its own tradition under erasure: not in the sense of forgetting it or just speaking about it critically (there has been enough of that for the last fifty years, and the main outcome has turned out to be the uncritical adoption of American standards in everyday practice), but, being mindful of the dangers offered by infinity, by accomplishing a revaluation by means of political and economic activity.

Eastern Europe may be of help here, if only Europe is prepared to redefine itself deep enough (yet nothing is less certain than that). The process of forging a new European identity can only make sense if it is not thought about along the lines of poor relatives uncritically adopting the values and institutions of the richer ones, which was the model of German unification. The West, if it thinks seriously about a European future, cannot demand the wholesale adoption of its values, rules and habits (even if they are sometimes uncritically applauded on the Eastern side), since Eastern experiences (which are multiple, because, of course, there is no one Eastern Europe, only Poland, Hungary, Romania, etc.) will also have to become the experience of the future Europe (at the moment largely incomprehensible for the "old" European Union), but they cannot be accommodated within the remains of the iron curtain identity still dominating in the West.

What might serve as a simple (maybe even too simple) example of the Eastern "problem" (if it is understood as something more than just backwardness of Eastern economies) is a completely different attitude to the European tradition operating here. Although the two world wars enforced a certain change towards it ("Rilke never seemed so alien to me as then, when the inferno of the war and occupation was over", said the Polish poet and Rilke's translator Mieczysław Jastrun), it were the red commissars who treated it as garbage or/and politicised

it whenever they could, whereas faithfulness to the heritage of European culture was treated as a means of resistance against the Soviet propaganda (also a kind of “popular” culture) and its use of both naked and discursive power. This, of course, bred its own form of myopia – Eastern literatures, from Josif Brodsky to Zbigniew Herbert, are full of wistful glorification of European, especially Mediterranean, heritage, as the Paradise lost to the East – but the fact remains that such “positive” experience of the heritage of Europe was another kind of truth European past found for itself beyond the iron curtain.

Is it possible to build a togetherness founded on such differing attitudes? The easiest way is, of course, not to attempt reconciliation at all, and advise the East to reform its old-fashioned ways along “postmodern” critical lines, denouncing European cultural discourse as a discourse of power (which it obviously also is). Yet, this would be a glaring example of the discourse of denial, the same discourse of power that is supposed to be unmasked, denying the existence of everything that does not fit in its frame. The values upheld by European tradition allowed many people in the East to resist the discourse of power and therefore live through the period of Sovietisation as more or less decent human beings who did not have to feel ashamed of themselves, and the fact that nothing of this kind belongs to the experience of the West does not invalidate it as experience to be reckoned with. But what would constitute a way of reckoning, however?

For both “sides” the tradition and the identity that goes with it are the thing of the past, in the sense of being irretrievably lost as the unproblematic source. For the West, this would mean admitting the critical point of no return within it, the existence of a rupture (the famous “All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage”)⁷. For the East, the rupture would mean the physical elimination of the bearers of this tradition (the “traditionally” educated classes) together with their material culture, especially during World War II (by nazism) and its aftermath (by communism). Such tradition becomes alien not because some better way of identification

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 367.

has been found (e.g. the global discourse of American infinity), but because it remains inaccessible as a convenient interpretive machine providing us with a clearly defined identity. Such an estranged tradition, the altogether other of our global experience, is, as is the fate of every alien creature, at the same time the most unclean and the purest, both garbage and the holy, and it only depends on us what we will make of it. The Western and Eastern understandings of European tradition are both “right”, but the point has to be reached in which both of these experiences could be felt as **continuous**, not as mutually exclusive. This can be understood as a proper way of erasure of the tradition (which is both embracing and denying) in order to understand ourselves as sharing such erasure of tradition or origin. Rather than identifying itself by means of the limit common with the superpower (superpowers?), Europe, to be itself, has to find its limit within itself by means of common understanding of the inevitability of such erasure (both in the East and in the West) and, at the same time, understanding that there is no common (“Pan-European”) understanding of such erasure⁸.

Although the erased tradition is the ruptured tradition, the tradition that abandoned its linear meaning (the “inevitable” laws of history, economy, globalisation, etc.), it does not mean that the erased values do not have anything to teach us (the linear discourse of, for instance, history is able to tell us a lot more than that it is just “bad”), and the first thing we need it for would be to allow us to make our own sense of what we do, even if it means a supposedly negative advice to look for a sense different from total mobilisation as a means of competition with the USA or the Far East. But is such an advice really negative? If we understand it as the instigation of passion for the interruption of infinitization, for something other than the will to power⁹, we will be able to grasp the integration of Europe as its effect. Such passion for interruption of infinitization might be seen as passion for sharing the limit with the East, sharing the limit that European tradition

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor, trans. P. Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 69.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

constitutes for both of us in our different ways, and exposition (in the sense of being exposed and exposing) of such rupture to the rupture of the other. Such exposure on both sides has to stand behind “economic” sharing of the Western wealth with the relatively poor East, or the East will just be treated as a backwater of Europe, the exotic but filthy other, and the beneficiary of Western philanthropic fits.

The European culture that is being imagined here would not be primarily the culture of tolerance, in which all is fine as long as everybody minds one’s own business, because all opinions are considered to be of equal value¹⁰. What is needed is the culture of justice that engages the other, but not in the mode of telling him what to do to deserve praise. Quite the opposite – a just culture must demand of itself a changing of its ways effectuated for the stranger’s sake. Such a culture is called to accept the stranger’s difference as the constitutive element of itself, to redefine itself taking the other into consideration, yet not as somebody it defines itself **against**, but somebody to define itself **with**. True sovereignty is not the infinite one that is able to enforce its own interests disregarding the others, but the sovereignty which is able to sacrifice its infinitising drive for the other. This will always demand a lot of effort (which would, however, be of a different order than mobilisation of power), because the other, as a stranger, will always be at first perceived as destroying the stability of one’s world and therefore unclean. Such attitude of neither tolerance nor supremacy is demanded of both East and West in order to create a properly European future, which would mean admitting the limit in yet another sense – admitting that all meanings are local, that the fusion of horizons is the outcome of common experience¹¹, and not of essentially infantile infinitization of one identity (both fordism and millenarism proclaim that history is bunk). Only the responsibility that is mindful of limits is able to learn, that is, to be guided by the experience of its own injustice, and therefore put its identity under

¹⁰ There is a serious question whether a culture which lacks the hierarchy of values can be called culture at all.

¹¹ More of it in Zygmunt Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2000), p. 348 and *passim*.

erasure in order to redefine itself and use its responsible potential in as many ways as possible (and there will always be the possibilities that have not been explored).

Responsible culture is not the culture of overwhelming tolerance that brings all values to the level of private property bought and sold according to the demands of the market, and measured only according to the profit they bring, or according to the power they are able to mobilise (which usually amounts to the same thing). It is devaluing of such values (and the infinite global model that goes with it) that is necessary, because the only responsible standard of judgement is neither whether a value is traditional (such attitude produces dead past) nor whether it is profitable at the moment (forgetting of the past is sentenced to repeat itself infinitely), but whether it opens a responsible future (which is impossible without a redefinition of the past). Keeping oneself open to such a future can mean only keeping one's identity open to responsible redefinition (but not the random redefinition of fashion or interest), that is, putting it under erasure (which does not mean forgetting the past identity and the values that go with it).

The initiated coming together of East and West, if it is performed responsibly, is liable to open such a future for Europe. Such future will not obey any of the contemporarily imagined scenarios whether they are terrifying ("they will flood us with their cheap labour and uncouth manners") or glorious ("our life will become what we see in western TV"), simply because such scenarios are narratives of the iron curtain identity, the ones that we have seen realised during the last fifty years, only brought up to a more extreme level. The future, if there is a future and not just infinitisation of the old identity, will be neither terrible nor glorious, but altogether different; neither better nor worse, since you cannot measure the limit with the infinite measure. But hopefully it will enable a European future, which will be able to release itself from the uncanny American idiom¹². Moreover, such

¹² Maybe the rift between most of western Europe and the USA initiated by the invasion of Iraq is the first sign of beginning to think this way, while the uncritical support of the George W. Bush administration by the East has sadly much more to do with our inferiority complex, caused by being looked down upon by the West, than with

future may have some meaning for the world, although not in the sense of becoming the world politics. If the coming together of East and West is a responsible work, if the “adoption” of the Eastern stranger ends up with a common redefinition of the limit internal to Europe, the redefined and open identity of erasure may be able to transform its relationship with other strangers both internal and external, that is, with the presence of the world in Europe (the immigrants) and for Europe (the neighbouring countries and cultures). Only finding the limit internally – as an urge to do justice to Europe, that is, to put its erasure (erasure which is not forgetting) to work – will enable an external opening of the fortress the European Union still imagines itself to be towards the former Soviet republics and the Islamic world, turned at present into another pretext for a grand scale global politics of infinity, as it is advertised on both popular and academic fronts. Wouldn't it also be just in another, more symbolic sense? After all, as it was the case with the tragic experience of ancient Greek *hubris*, Europe finds its limitation as the second coming of its Greek origin (in the form of its written heritage) returned to it at the dawn of modernity by the Moorish hand. Then, whence does it come, this identity called European? Is it impossible to be thinking about it as yet another strange limit which would not be an externalising one?

any real support of American “war on terrorism”. It is not so surprising that the East, in its belated manner, only repeats the post-war infinitisation route of the West in order to somehow make up for the superiority with which it is treated – it behaves pathetically, but at the same time mimetically. The parting of ways between Europe and the USA seemed also to have a different limiting effect: Bush and his Defence Secretary Rumsfeld came to realise – belatedly, to be sure – that it can be very difficult or even impossible to handle the matter of Iraq single-handedly by the USA (and it is not a matter of the amount of soldiers employed), which proves that their politics of infinity is self-defeating.