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Europe as refuge

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Ever since the American elections of November 2016, at least, things have become clearer.

England has drifted back into its dream of empire, nineteenth-century style; America is seeking to become great again, post-war style, with sepia photos, as in 1950. Europe – continental Europe – now finds itself alone, weak and more divided than ever. Poland is dreaming of an imaginary country; Hungary now wants only ‘pure-blooded’ Hungarians to live in it; the Dutch, French and Italians are struggling with parties that seek to shut themselves away behind equally imaginary borders. Scotland, Catalonia and Flanders wish to become states. Meanwhile, the Russian Bear is licking its chops and China is finally fulfilling its dream of becoming the ‘Middle Kingdom’ yet again, while ignoring the interests of its fringe populations.

Europe is being dismembered: it counts less than a hazelnut in a nutcracker. And this time around, it can no longer rely on the United States, now controlled by a new Lord of Misrule.

So maybe this is the right time to reconstruct a United Europe. Oh, not the same one as the founding fathers dreamed up just after the war, based on iron, coal and steel, or more recently on the deluded hope it might escape from history via common rules of standardization or the single currency. No:

if Europe must reunite, this is because of threats just as grave as those of the 1950s – though the continent now needs to take its place in a history utterly different from that of the twentieth century.

Europe faces three threats: the decline of the countries that invented globalization; climate change; and the need to provide refuge for millions of migrants and refugees. These three threats, in fact, are merely different aspects of one single metamorphosis: the European territory has changed nature, and we Europeans are all migrating towards lands that need to be rediscovered and reoccupied.

The first historic event is Brexit. The country that invented unrestricted markets on land and at sea, the country that was forever pushing for the European Union to become nothing more than a vast shop, is the very same country that, when faced with the sudden arrival in Calais of thousands of refugees, impulsively decided to stop playing the game of globalization. It is withdrawing from Europe, and thus from history, absorbed in dreams of an empire that nobody believes in any more.

The second historic event: the election of Trump. The country that imposed its own particular globalization on the world, and with such violence; the country that built itself on the basis of migration, while eliminating its earliest inhabitants; that same country is now entrusting its destiny to a man who is promising to lock himself away in a fortress, refusing entry to any refugees, no longer coming to the aid of any cause that is not rooted in his own soil, while preparing to intervene anywhere and everywhere in the same casual, blundering way.

Every man for himself! Full steam backwards! The problem: there's no longer a home, not for anyone. Shove off! Everyone's going to have to move. Why? Because there's no longer a planet able to fulfil the dreams of globalization.

This is the third and by far the most important historic event: *12 December 2015*, in Paris, when the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) finally reached an agreement.

The significant thing is not what the delegates decided on; it is not even that this agreement will be applied (the climate-change deniers in the White House and the Senate will do all

they can to hamstring it). No, the significant thing is that, on that day, all the countries that signed, to general applause, realized that, if they were all to go ahead and follow their respective modernization plans, there was no planet compatible with their hopes for development. Until then, they had been building castles in the air.

If there is no planet, no earth, no soil, no territory to house the Globe of globalization to which all countries claimed to be heading, what should we do? Either we deny the existence of the problem, or else *we seek to come down to earth*. For each of us, the question now becomes: ‘Are you going to keep nursing dreams of escape, or are you going to search for a land in which you and your children might live?’ This is what now divides people, much more than knowing whether you are politically on the right or the left.

The United States had two solutions. By finally realizing the extent of the change in circumstances, and the hugeness of their responsibility, they could finally become realistic, leading the free world out of the abyss; or they could sink into denial. Trump seems to have decided to leave America to dream on for a few more years, delaying the possibility of coming down to earth and dragging other countries down into the abyss.

We Europeans cannot allow ourselves to do this. At the very same time as we are becoming aware of many different threats, we will need to take into our continent millions of people – people who, thanks to the joint impact of war, the failure of globalization, and climate change, will (like us, against us, or with us) be thrown into the search for a land that they and their children can live in. We are going to have to live together with people who have not hitherto shared our traditions, our way of life or our ideals, and who are close to us and foreign to us – terribly close and terribly foreign.

With these migrating peoples, the only thing we have in common is that *we are all deprived of land*. We, the *old Europeans*, are deprived because there is no planet for globalization and we are going to change the entire way we live; they, the *future Europeans*, are deprived because they have had to leave their old, devastated lands, and will need to learn to change the entire way *they* live. Not much to ask? But it’s our only way out: finding, together, a territory we can live in.

This is the new universality. The only alternative is to pretend that nothing has changed, to withdraw behind our wall, and to continue to promote, with eyes wide open, the dream of the ‘American way of life’, while knowing that nine billion human beings will never benefit from it.

When everyone snuggles behind their fortifications, it is evidently the worst possible time to think in terms of the openness of borders and a revolution in lifestyles. However, migration and the new climate situation comprise *one and the same threat*.

Most of our fellow citizens deny what is happening to the Earth but understand perfectly well that the immigrant question will really put all of their desires for identity to the test. For now, encouraged by the so-called ‘populist’ parties, they have grasped ecological change in only one of its aspects: the fact that it is sending across their borders huge numbers of unwanted people. Hence their response: ‘We must erect firm borders so we won’t be swamped.’

But it’s the other aspect of this same change that they still haven’t properly realized: for a long time, the new climate situation has been sweeping away all borders, exposing us to every wind – and against such an invasion, we can build no walls.

If we wish to defend our identities, we are also going to have to identify those shapeless, stateless migrants known as climate, erosion, pollution, dwindling resources and the destruction of habitat. Even if you seal your borders against human refugees, you will never be able to stop these others getting by.

This is where we need to introduce an idea from science fiction – let’s call it a plausible fiction.

The enlightened elites – they do exist – realized, after the 1990s, that the dangers summed up in the word ‘climate’ were increasing, though the word itself needs to be given a broad meaning: a new set of relations between human beings and the Earth, relations that had hitherto been quite stable. Until then, it had been possible to grab a piece of land, secure property rights over it, work it, and use it and abuse it – but the land itself kept more or less quiet.

The enlightened elites started to pile up evidence suggesting that this state of affairs wasn’t going to last. They had

known this for a long while, of course, but let's say they had bravely learned to ignore it. *Under* the soil of private property, the seizure of land, the working of territory, *another soil*, another land, another territory was starting to shift, to quake, to shake. A sort of earthquake, if you like, that really did start to shake up the enlightened elites. 'Look, nothing's going to be the same way as before; you're going to have to pay dearly for coming back to Earth and for a volte-face on the part of hitherto docile powers.'

The problem is that this threat, this warning, has been heard loud and clear by other elites who may be less enlightened but have plenty of money and large interests, and are above all extremely keen to ensure their own well-being.

And this is where the hypothesis of a political fiction intervenes: those elites have clearly understood that the warning was accurate, but they did not deduce from this undeniable truth that they would have to pay, and pay dearly, for the Earth to perform a volte-face on itself.

They drew two conclusions, both of which have now led to the election of a Lord of Misrule to the White House: yes, this volte-face needs to be paid for, at a high price, but it's *the others who will pay*, not us, no way; and this undeniable truth about the new climate situation is something *whose very existence we can deny*.

If this hypothesis is correct, it enables us to grasp what, from the 1980s, was called 'deregulation' and the 'dismantling of the Welfare State', from the 2000s, 'climate change denial', and above all, over the last forty years, a dizzying increase in inequality. And we need to see that all of these things are part of the same phenomenon: the elites were so thoroughly enlightened that they decided there would be no future life for the world, *so they needed to get rid of all the burdens of solidarity as fast as possible* (i.e. deregulation); that they needed to construct a kind of golden fortress for the few per cent of people who would manage to get on in life (i.e. soaring inequality); and that, to hide the crass selfishness of this flight from the common world, they would need to completely deny the very existence of the threat behind this mad dash (climate change denial). Without this hypothesis, we can't explain either the soaring inequality, or the scepticism about climate change, or the raging deregulation. These

three movements define the history into which continental Europe finds it so difficult to fit.

Let's draw on the threadbare metaphor of the *Titanic*: enlightened people can see the iceberg heading straight for the prow, know that shipwreck is inevitable, grab the lifeboats, and ask the orchestra to play enough lullabies so that they can make a clean getaway under cover of night before the alarming list of the vessel alerts the other classes!

Those people – the elites that we should now call, not enlightened, but obscurantist – have realized that, if they want to survive in comfort, *they shouldn't seem to be pretending that they share their space with the rest of the world*. Globalization immediately starts to look quite different: from the ship's rails, the lower classes – who are now wide awake – can see the lifeboats bobbing off into the distance. The orchestra continues to play 'Nearer My God To Thee', but the music is no longer enough to cover the howls of rage ...

And 'rage' is indeed the word to describe the reaction of disbelief and bafflement that such an abandonment, such a betrayal, arouses.

When political analysts try to grasp the current situation, they use and abuse the term 'populism'. They accuse 'ordinary people' of indulging in a narrow-minded vision, in their fears, their naive mistrust of elites, their bad taste in culture, and above all in their passion for identity, folklore, archaism and boundaries – let alone a culpable indifference to the facts. These people lack generosity, open-mindedness, rationality; they have no taste for risk (ah! that taste for risk, preached by those who are safe wherever their air miles permit them to fly).

This is to forget that 'ordinary folk' *have been callously betrayed* by those who have abandoned the idea of truly bringing about the modernization of the planet *with* everyone else, because they knew, before everyone else, better than everyone else, that this modernization was impossible – for lack of a planet big enough for their dreams of limitless growth.

If Trump's election clarifies the new political situation, this is because the horizon to which it is dragging the United States gives an idea so *diametrically opposed* to the right direction that it ultimately defines rather well, by way of contrast, the

nature of the third attractor! Indeed, Trump's innovation consists in setting out a whole political programme based on the systematic *denial* of climate change. For the first time, climate change denial is determining all political decisions. What a clarification!

We are failing to respect the originality of the fascists when we compare Trump with the movements of the 1930s. The only thing the two movements share is the invention of a new combination that, for a while, leaves the old elites completely disorientated. But the combinations invented by the different fascisms were still in line with the old vector, leading from ancient territories towards modernization. They managed to combine a return to a dreamed-of past – Rome, Germania – with revolutionary ideals and industrial and technical modernization, while reinventing the total state – the state at war – *against* the very idea of the individual.

We find nothing of the kind in the current innovation: the state is mocked, the individual is king, and what needs to be done first and foremost is to save time by loosening all constraints – before everybody realizes that there is no world that corresponds to that America.

Trump's originality lies in the way he brings together, in one single movement, a mad dash for maximum profit while abandoning the rest of the world to its fate (the new members of his team responsible for 'ordinary folk' are billionaires!); a whole nation's mad dash backwards to national and ethnic categories ('Make America Great Again' – behind a wall!); and, finally, an explicit denial of the geological and climatic situation.

Trumpism – if we may use this term – is a political innovation of a kind we rarely see, and one that we need to take seriously. Just as fascism managed to combine extremes, to the complete surprise of the politicians and commentators of the time, Trumpism combines extremes and deceives the world with its trumpery, at least for a while. Instead of contrasting the two mad dashes – towards globalization and towards a return to the old national terrain – Trump acts as if they could be fused. This fusion is of course possible only if the very existence of a situation of conflict between modernization on the one hand and material conditions on the other is denied. Hence the role of climate-change scepticism,

which cannot be understood without this. (Remember that, up until Clinton, questions of climate change could be agreed on by both parties.)

And it is easy to see why: the total lack of realism in the combination – billionaires encouraging millions of members of the so-called middle classes to return to protecting the past! – is blindingly self-evident. For now, it's nothing more than a matter of remaining completely indifferent to the geopolitical situation.

For the first time, a whole political movement is no longer claiming it can seriously confront geopolitical realities, but is explicitly placing itself outside of any constraint, 'offshore', as it were – as in tax havens. What counts most of all is that they should not have to share with the masses a world that, as they know, will never again be held in common. As if that third attractor, that spectre that is haunting the whole of politics, could be held at bay indefinitely.

It is quite remarkable that this invention comes from a real-estate developer who is forever in debt, going from one bankruptcy to another, and who became a celebrity thanks to reality TV (another form of unrealistic escapism). The complete indifference to facts that marked the electoral campaign as much as it marks the new administration is simply a consequence of claiming you can live without being grounded in reality. When you've promised those who think they're heading back to a country they once knew that they will indeed rediscover their past there (whereas you're actually dragging them towards a place that, for the great mass of electors, has no real existence), then you can't be too picky about empirical evidence!

It's pointless to get angry when Trump's electors 'don't believe the facts': they're not stupid. The situation is quite the opposite: it's because the overall geopolitical situation has to be denied that an indifference to facts becomes so essential. If they had to realize what a huge contradiction there is between the mad dash forwards and the mad dash backwards, they'd have to start coming down to earth! In this sense, Trumpism defines (albeit negatively, of course, by taking up the opposite position) the first ecologist government.

And it goes without saying that 'ordinary folk' shouldn't have too many illusions about how the venture is going to

turn out. Those most attracted by Trump are exactly those tiny elites who, at the beginning of the 1990s, detected that there was no possible world that they could share with nine billion individuals. ‘Push deregulation to the limit, pump out everything there’s still left to pump out of the ground – drill, baby, drill! – and if we follow Trump we’ll end up winning thirty or forty years’ respite for us and our children. *Après nous, le déluge* – we’ll be dead anyway.’

Accountants are well acquainted with entrepreneurs who behave in a ‘cavalier’ fashion towards the facts. Trump’s originality lies in the way he makes the greatest nation on earth behave in a similarly cavalier way. Donald Trump: the Bernie Madoff of the state! Not forgetting what lies behind the whole situation: he is in charge of the nation that *has the most to lose* from a return to reality, from a change of direction towards the attractor Earth. It’s a crazy decision to make, but it’s understandable.

You don’t need to be very bright to foresee that the whole thing will end in a terrible conflagration. This is the only real parallel with the different fascisms. Marx was wrong: history does not go simply from tragedy to farce, it can repeat itself once more as a tragic piece of buffoonery.

In any case, the clarification that this innovation has produced gives *progressive forces* – defined now as those that turn their attention to the third term, i.e. the Earth – a precise idea of the difficulties they are going to have to face. It’s no longer enough to divert those dreaming of a return to their homeland from their path; it’s no longer enough to form an alliance with those aiming at gaining access to a global dimension: we now need to confront head-on those whom the Pied Piper is leading in a direction that will take us, yet again, away from the Earth.

Peter Sloterdijk once said that Europe was the club of nations that had definitively abandoned the idea of empire. Let’s leave the Brexiteers, those who voted for Trump, the Turks, the Chinese and the Russians to wallow in their dreams of imperial domination. We know that, if they still wish to reign over a territory in the cartographical sense of the word, they have no more chance than we did of dominating the Earth that, nowadays, dominates us as well as it dominates them. So the challenge to be met is *tailor-made*

for Europe, since it is Europe that invented the strange story of globalization before becoming one of its victims. History belongs to those who can be the first to come to earth, to land on an earth that can be inhabited – unless the others, the dreamers of old-style *Realpolitik*, have finally made this earth vanish away for good.

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The Great Regression

Edited by Heinrich Geiselberger

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