The anti-European tradition of Europe

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North and South, East and West, centre and periphery - the dichotomies with which Europe’s constitution is riven have profound cultural-historical roots. Particularly the schism between the Byzantine and Graeco-Roman cultures is a persistent source of friction, writes the renowned Romanian art historian and philosopher Andrei Pleșu.

Allow me to begin with a personal recollection. In the first half of 1998, I took part in a meeting of the Council of the European Union. At the time, the presidency of the Council was held by the United Kingdom, represented by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. The other participants were the foreign ministers of EU countries and prospective members. With the exception of Bronislaw Geremek, everybody spoke in English during the meeting. To me, Romania’s foreign minister at the time, it seemed polite to speak the language of the meeting’s chairman, Robin Cook. But, during a break, my French counterpart, Hubert Védrine, took me aside and said, in a friendly but rather perplexed tone: ‘I thought Romania was a Francophone country. Why did you choose to speak in English?’ So, after that brief conversation, at the working lunch that followed, I delivered my contribution in French. Romania was then endeavouring to become a member of the European Union and wanted to show it was co-operating with all its potential future partners. However, after lunch, Cook approached me. ‘This morning you spoke in English. Why did you suddenly switch to French?’

This was my first bout of perplexity during my country’s arduous but fascinating path to European integration. It seemed to me that the European ‘Union’ was not the rosy ‘common home’ that everybody was talking about. It was not a pure, enlightened administration. It was a living creature, with its own humours, jealousies, pride, good and bad moods, crises, fevers, and neuroses. Let me add that, since Brexit, my perplexity has acquired a new dimension. I wonder, for example, what the Union’s new lingua franca will be once Britain has left. Will we preserve English, out of a kind of commemorative melancholy, or will we witness a battle for supremacy between French and German, with possible political irritation on the part of the Mediterranean countries?

Engaged as we East Europeans were in the process of re-entering the European
community, we were unaware of, or overlooked, the old and lasting tensions of continental history, its constituent polychrome nature. Europe has a long tradition of self-segregation, of multi-dimensionality, of debates on national identity that can go as far as internal conflict. The first failure of our ‘common home’ was the fracturing of the Roman Empire into a western and an eastern segment. Rome broke away from Byzantium, Catholicism from Orthodoxy, Protestantism from Catholicism, the Empire from the Papacy, East from West, North from South, the Germanic from the Latin, communism from capitalism, Britain from the rest of the continent. The spectre of division is what the Belgian philosopher Jacques Dewitte (admiringly) called the ‘European exception’. We easily perceive the differences that make up our identity; we are able at any time to distance ourselves from ourselves. We invented both colonialism and anti-colonialism; we invented Eurocentrism and the relativisation of Europeanism. The world wars of the last century began as intra-European wars; the European West and East were for decades kept apart by a ‘cold war’. An impossible ‘conjugal’ triangle has constantly inflamed spirits: the German, the Latin and the Slavic worlds. An increasingly acute irritation is taking hold between the European Union and Europe in the wider sense, between central administration and national sovereignty, between the Eurozone countries and those with their own currencies, between the Schengen countries and those excluded from the treaty. All seasoned with the noble rhetoric of ‘unity’, a ‘common house,’ and continental solidarity. Where were we, the newcomers, to place ourselves in a landscape that by no means erred towards monotony? In the following, I shall choose three of the front-lines that marked and still mark the family portrait of Europe’s complicated fabric: 1) the North–South division; 2) the East-West division; and 3) the centre-periphery division.

The North-South division

‘Don’t forget,’ say the Greeks, ‘that “Europe” is a Greek word, the same as “democracy”, “economy” and “politics”.’ I would nonetheless hasten to add that ‘chaos’, ‘apocalypse’ and ‘catastrophe’ are also words that come from Greek. At any rate, it is obvious that the South has arguments to consider itself the source of European culture, even if what we today call Europe is the result of an evolutionary course that has moved steadily northwards: from Athens to Rome, from Rome to the Franco-German Empire, and culminating with the Industrial Revolution in England. Modernity is inconceivable without the contribution of the Protestant North. And so the South has the superiority complex of the founding homeland and, at the same time, an inferiority complex in matters of civilisation. But the Anglo-Saxon world also has a complex about the South, which, as Wolf Lepenies says, is the depository of savoir-vivre, to which northerners can counter only with a drab savoir-faire. The North rediscovers the attraction of the South (Drang nach Süden), Goethe indulges in Italienische Reisen, Byron dies in Greece. But the South does not mean only Greece. Among other things, it also means the prestige of Latinity.

In 2013, Libération published the translation of an article by Giorgio Agamben, which gave rise to intense debate in the West’s marketplace of ideas. The title of the article sounds like a manifesto: ‘The Latin empire should counterattack!’ Agamben had rediscovered – and decided to make topical – a text by the Russian-born philosopher Alexandre Kojève, dating from just after the Second World War. Kojève, who for a time held high office in the French Government, warned against the danger to Europe’s
political evolution represented by a prosperous and ‘Americanised’ Germany. To prevent this danger, he proposed the establishment of a ‘Latin empire’ that would bring together the major Catholic countries: France, Italy and Spain (under the leadership of France, obviously). Agamben adopted this grandiose idea, emphasising that the only viable alliances are those based on kindred lifestyle, religion and culture. You cannot ask a Greek to live like a Scandinavian; you cannot force an Italian to adopt Swiss ways.

Agamben’s essay is not lacking in acute observations, but something is disturbing. On the one hand it would seem that, as one German commentator put it, paraphrasing Marx, a ‘ghost is haunting Europe: the ghost of bad Germans.’ ‘Culture’ is the ‘natural’ medium of Catholic Latinity, while Germany has nothing but ‘civilisation’. This is the opinion of two ideologues – Kojève and Agamben – whose intellectual trajectories were heavily influenced by German thought. Kojève developed under the influence of Heidegger and, in particular, Jaspers, making a career for himself as a Hegelian in France. Agamben is also deeply familiar with Heidegger and Benjamin. On the other hand, if we are moving southward, then we have to go all the way. Let us recover the Near East (with the Syria of John Chrysostom) and North Africa (with the founding theology of St Augustine). Let us revaluate the idea of a Mediterranean Union, which has always been there, particularly in the French ‘imaginary’, from Saint-Simon to Nicolas Sarkozy. At the same time, let us follow Lepenies’s distinction between legitimate regional consolidation of the Mediterranean space and the arrogant idea of a ‘Latin empire’, which to him quite rightly seems outdated. But to return to the subject of newcomers, what about the Poles, the Hungarians, the Baltic countries, the Romanians (Orthodox Latins), and even the Russians and the Greeks? Will we have to choose between the ‘cultural’ hegemony of Latinity and the ‘civilisational’ advantages of the Anglo-Saxon ‘empire’?

The East-West division

Even if we no longer realise it, we still live in the shadow of the old antagonism between Rome and Constantinople, between the reforming West, the source of modernity, on the one hand, and conservative Byzantium, contaminated by the Slavic and the Ottoman world, on the other. We might say that the Great Schism of 1056 was the first failure of European integration. Historians are in agreement that, after the eleventh century, the West flourished while the East stagnated. In view of each of the ‘two lungs’ of European Christendom (the expression used by John Paul II), the image of the other lung deteriorates to the point of antagonism. ‘Byzantine’ comes to be a label for excess, stagnation, and a series of defects: despotism (excessive centralisation), dogmatism, religious intolerance, excessive state bureaucracy.

A Romanian Byzantinologist (Șerban Tanașoca) has observed that the difficulties encountered by East- and South-Eastern European countries in their efforts to integrate into the European community cannot be explained with reference only to post-communist inertia and trauma, but also to the fact that they are by definition affiliated to a different type of civilisation: the decadent civilisation of Byzantium. In 1734 Montesquieu drew a distinction between oriental authoritarianism and the Roman-derived constitutionalism adopted by the West. Also in the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon painted an unsparring portrait of the East: corruption, depravity, superstition, indolence. The Byzantium described in the writings of Procopius of Caesarea possesses the laxness of vice-ridden femininity, in contrast to the virile vigour of Graeco-Roman antiquity.
The descendants of Byzantium, in their turn, find reasons to condemn the excesses of western rationalism (a blend of Scholasticism and Cartesianism), materialism, anthropocentrism, atheism, and all that western ‘modernity’ and ‘secularisation’ opposes to eastern tradition. In addition, and not without justification, they point out that it was the Byzantines who published the first textbooks of Greek in the West, that the Italian humanists of the fifteenth century salvaged the Greek sources of European civilisation (literature, law, patristic theology) thanks to the Byzantine scholars who had gone into exile in the West after the Ottoman occupation. They also invoke the unfortunate fourth crusade of 1204, which barbarously sacked Constantinople, causing what the great Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates called ‘the deepest rift of enmity’ between the two worlds.

But the two segments of Europe were also cracking within their own borders. In the East in particular, there were, on the one hand, apologists for synchronisation with the West (usually educated in western universities) and, on the other, zealous advocates of Constantinopolitan glory, which survived in what Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga called ’Byzantium after Byzantium.’ In tsarist Russia, this was also the cause of the conflict between the zapadniki (the pro-westerners) and the Slavophile traditionalists.

In the post-communist countries’ difficult period of pre-accession to the European Union, the general perception regarding their inability to meet the acquis quickly was that they suffered from a deficit of European-ness, explainable simply by their geographical position in the East. In such circumstances, to Europeanise yourself seemed to mean strictly to westernise yourself. There is, I suggest, a historical-geographical condition capable of giving shape to an unconventional European-ness when it comes to the countries of the East and South-East of the continent. These countries may be European precisely because of their problematic position relative to a certain kind of Eurocentrism.

A Serbian student of mine at the New Europe College in Bucharest formulated the specific profile of the region in highly expressive terms: ‘We are the East of the West and the West of the East.’ It is a description that includes both Romania and all the states of the Black Sea Region and Balkans. Stimulated by this formula, I have tried to analyse the presuppositions of his argument. To be the East of the West and the West of the East might mean the following:

To be both... and. We have both an eastern component, with a broad openness to the oriental world, and a western component, linked to the civilisation of the Old Europe. For many people, this is an argument in favour of our ability to synthesise, in favour of a potential mission to harmonise differences, with the positive effect of their cohabitation. This would be the positive interpretation of our historical and geographical synthesis, which culminates in a true mythology of intermedation. But there is also the risk of a mixtum compositum, which would leave us without any distinct image, victims of an incongruence that gives rise to disorder.

To be both means, as a matter of fact, to be between. Because we take a little something from both directions, we are, it is said, conciliators by vocation; we form a bridge between two separate shores, allowing them to communicate. We are a pivot between Asia and Europe, just as we are a balance between North and South. But at the same time (and, unfortunately, more and more often), this exposes us to the status of a vague territory, of a space of transit, swept by winds from every direction. The mediator is
important, but not properly speaking an interlocutor. She is also constantly subject to a suspension of any choice.

A third version of our equivocal position would be neither... nor. We are neither eastern enough, nor western enough. Dumped in a place that is more like a displacement, stalked by opposing temptations, standing indecisively at the crossroads, we are in constant search of our real self, of the best means to elucidate and express our true being. When faced with eastern excesses, then we are westerners. When western rigour is demanded of us, then we pigheadedly take eastern liberties. We therefore experience a permanent syndrome of non-belonging. We have no place. Or rather, we are poorly placed. As Emil Cioran said in a letter to a Romanian friend, after the earthquake of 1977: Nous sommes mal placés!

Our being the East of the West and the West of the East also means simultaneously feeling a passion for both old and new. Inclining toward the East, we exalt tradition, the ancestral, times immemorial, orthodoxy. But tempted by the West, we seek and idolatrise the new, we aspire to synchronism, adaptation, headlong modernity. The inevitable risk: ‘forms without content’, overhasty borrowing, abusive adaptation. And on the other hand, intransigent conservatism, immobility, opacity.

This also means oscillating between an insufficiently (or incompletely) assimilated West and a repressed but defining East. Either we pose as westerners, provoking rebellion on the part of our non-Latin background (of which we are rather embarrassed), or we pose as Orthodox fundamentalists, causing vague bewilderment on the part of our western partners and creating problems when it comes to European integration. By turns nostalgic, ambitious, virtually senile or proudly juvenile, we are ready to adopt straight-legged German trousers, but sentimentally pine for baggy Ottoman shalwars.

Is it a good thing? A bad thing? Do we show the symptoms of a still promising youth or those of an incurable blockage? Are we raw material, full of potential, or mere residues of former empires? For, on top of the imprint of what Dimitri Obolensky called ‘the Byzantine Commonwealth’, lies the legacy of a centuries-long cohabitation with the ‘Ottoman’ Commonwealth. Not to mention religious solidarity with Russian Orthodoxy. How Turkish is South-Eastern Europe nowadays? This reminds me of a conversation I had about two years ago, over a glass of wine, with my friend Edhem Eldem, who teaches history at the Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. ‘Do you know something?’ Edhem said. ‘The Greeks are Turks too, but they think they’re Italians.’ Wishing to display a self-critical European spirit, I answered: ‘My dear Edhem, the Romanians are probably Turks too, but they think they’re French.’ Later, I told my Hungarian friend László Rajk about it. He looked around him, as if to make sure nobody could hear him, and said: ‘You know, the Hungarians are Turks too, but they think they’re Hungarians...’

**The centre-periphery division**

The question of regional position inevitably brings to the fore the debate about a possible hierarchy – both real and symbolic – between the various European countries. Like in the past, people talk about a *Kern Europa*, the core, the powerhouse, the driving force, the vanguard of unification, represented by the Franco-German tandem. Economists, philosophers (Jürgen Habermas), and top politicians have put forward substantial
arguments in support of this idea. And it would be ridiculous to dismiss it in the name of local pride. We know that Descartes wasn’t born in Sofia and Hegel wasn’t born in Bucharest. We know that in there are few places in the world – and not just in Europe – where there is such prosperity, social stability, and such style. And it is perfectly normal that so complicated and important a historical process as European integration should have a guiding spirit to match. At any rate, the idea is not new: it had venerable proponents as early as the Thirty Years War, and then in Kant, and in Saint-Simon and Thierry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Correlatively, the idea of a two-speed Europe has also arisen – a concept inevitably not to the liking of those who travel more slowly (even though the idea was not the result of a central decision but due to the inaptitude of some of the travellers themselves).

Although realistic in the immediate present, the idea of the core nonetheless has some flaws. The first is of a historical order. The relationship between the centre and the periphery has, over the course of time, proven to be highly flexible and therefore inconclusive. Europe’s first hard core was the Mediterranean space. Then, as we already mentioned, it made its way from Athens to Rome, before making a long sojourn in Constantinople. For a time the hard core was Aachen. In the seventeenth century, the European vanguard meant Louis XIV, and in the century that followed it was England, with the Industrial Revolution. In 1815, the essential Europe was equivalent to the Holy Alliance, uniting a Catholic Austrian dynasty, a Protestant Prussian dynasty, and a Russian Orthodox dynasty. Italy has had its great moments (the Renaissance), and so too did Spain and Holland. And it remains to be seen what the hard core looks like now that EU enlargement has brought with it two hundred million new Europeans (central, eastern, and south-eastern). Viewed historically, Europe looks less like a schematic apricot and more like a pomegranate, with multiple cores. In absolute terms, as Pascal said, the centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere. There is a Latin Europe and an Anglo-Saxon Europe, a Catholic Europe, a Jewish Europe, a Protestant Europe, an Orthodox Europe, and lately, whether we like it or not, a Muslim Europe.

The idea of a European core also has a psychological and strategic disadvantage. The ‘marginals’ can declare themselves demotivated. They feel they are perceived as a sort of background noise, with very distant prospects for real integration. At best, they are uninvited guests condescendingly tolerated at the core table. Not to mention that the psychology of the excluded quickly turns to resentment if it does not become placidity. At the margins, there are always plenty of people who can hardly wait to indulge in the voluptuousness, the torpor, the irresponsibility of marginality. They can hardly wait for somebody to tell them that they don’t have to get involved, that everything is decided elsewhere, somewhere at the top, in the blinding light of the core. Indeed, once the door of derision has been opened, we will be tempted to view the whole of the European continent as a minor province on the world map. ‘A peninsula of Asia’, as it amused Paul Valéry to say...

After this collection of divisions, historical and stylistic tensions and hysterical emphasis on differences, we might be tempted to become Eurosceptic, if not downright depressive. But that was not my intention. On the contrary! All the while I have had in mind the benefits of diversity, the seductive vitality of an organism that defies systematisation, that rejects geometrical homogenisation. We all agree that we don’t want the same Europe as Adolf Hitler wanted (one of the pioneers of a united Europe). We don’t want a Europe of
exclusion, regimentation, ethnic and ideological purity, crucified alterities. Such an evolution would lead to the ‘thermal’, entropic death of our solidarity. We prefer a complicated Europe to a triumphalist ‘mantra’, incapable of ever entering into discussion. We prefer a Europe of continuous fermentation, a Europe that confronts its own crises, that defines itself, among other things, by its capacity to go – as Leszek Kołakowski observed – through moments of mauvaise conscience. The Europe to which we adhere is the Europe that founded anthropology, the discipline of understanding cultural difference; the Europe that dedicated itself to the study of savage thought, that filled its universities with departments for the study of non-European languages and civilisations. We often forget that the history of modern Europe began with the improbable encounter between a decaying Roman Empire and invading nomadic tribes from Asia. We are the product of that spectacular hybridisation. This perhaps explains our openness to everything that does not frame us within a static identity. It was no coincidence that Karl Kerényi suggested a possible etymology for the word Europe as ‘the one whose eyes are wide open’ and, by extension, ‘the one who has broad vision’.

Obviously, we don’t want to replace the triumphalism of an eternally peaceful common home with the triumphalism of fertile incoherence, of crisis understood as a way of life, the only genuinely realistic, subtle, profitable way of life. Yes, the European Union has ‘the fragility of all things political,’ as Ivan Krastev says somewhere. Yes, Jacques Delors was right to fear that in our endeavour to construct a community, we might become a kind of UPO: ‘an unidentified political object’. Yes, we might join Tony Judt in saying that ‘Europe is more than a geographical notion, but less than an answer’. Yes, even in the late 1980s, Hans Magnus Enzensberger had fears about the post-democratic evolution of our ‘gentle monster from Brussels’. As we know, there are severe cracks in democracy, capitalism and globalisation. Nationalism is no longer an arrogant vestige of provincial Europe, but a successful electoral weapon in the continent’s centre. We are faced with Brexit, Turkey, refugees, terrorism, Crimea, financial crises, and more. But the solution is neither deconstructive panic nor the rosy demagogy of a luminous future. Throughout its existence, Europe has been trained to survive, to integrate its fractures, to transform its scars into signs of life. It was of the advantages (and the charm?) of a seminal disorder that Michael Portillo, the British Minister of Defence between 1995 and 1997, was probably thinking when he said, ‘I am very much in favour of an untidy Europe. I’m hoping that apart from being good for the new democracies, enlargement will create an untidier Europe.’ If I am not mistaken, we are very close to achieving this goal.

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