Out of love for the South

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We speak about the differences between North and South as though they explain everything. In the process, age-old prejudices again penetrate the European consciousness and shape how we think about the world.

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness...
Henry David Thoreau, 1862

We start with a disaster. On 25 June 2015, a plane operated by low-cost airline Germanwings crashed in the mountains above the village of Prads-Haute-Bléone, Haute Provence. As I sat before the television screen, I was gripped by that chilling horror you feel only a few times in life. The news was something that reached deep into my own life; much deeper than I understood at first.

First, there was the realization that the crash was the result of someone’s free will. The graphics showing the plane’s path as it lost altitude left no doubt. The pilot followed a slow, straight line directly into a sheer wall, sending everyone on the plane to their certain death. It suddenly became clear to me that our ‘brave new world’ is threatened not from some external danger, but because its own structures are fraying at the seams.

When talking about natural disasters, we are capable of considering that they may be a consequence of climate change, itself caused by our irresponsible treatment of the environment. But when we talk about society, the underlying causes elude us and we see only a single, mentally unbalanced individual.

There were all kinds of rational explanation for the incident. Yet none could compensate for its expression of unfathomable isolation, felt by a young person no longer checked by any sort of internal mechanism, who transferred his pain to others. A cry for help? Probably. Hidden in his decision, was there some need to change the world? Recall Hamlet’s ‘This time is out of joint.’ Was this the force of youth resisting the system in its desire for justice, through the most desperate of acts? Perhaps.

My youngest daughter was seventeen at the time and had a boyfriend in Germany; she flew from Barcelona to Düsseldorf every month or two. Just as we used to take the bus on romantic dates when we were young, our children today travel from one end of Europe to
another using low-cost airlines. That very week she had a ticket already printed out and, just two days later, boarded a plane flying that same route. Of course, she arrived at her destination.

For the majority of Europeans, there are no longer any borders. Whoever can afford the trip easily forgets about all the obstacles and is irritated by having a bottle of water or can of shaving cream taken from them at airport security. Freedom of movement has taken hold like a brushfire. We have forgotten about the Iron Curtain. Nobody remembers what it was like to exchange money on the black market, or the empty shelves in the department stores, since shopping back then brought no pleasure at all.

Airport view. Photo via Wallpaper Flare.

**Symbolic boundaries**

As a result of all this optimism, we have forgotten that the Berlin Wall was erected as a 'Chinese wall', as if following Kafka’s instructions to the letter. Every wall has holes, observed the recluse from Prague, since even the closest supervision cannot prevent negligence during its construction. The physical robustness of a wall is of no significance, he noted. The only important thing is that people believe it to be eternal. Then the wall ensures unity and security by its very existence.

Writing in 1917, Kafka speaks prophetically of how an ideological wall is solid as a rock: 'Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a coordinated movement of the people, their blood no longer confined in the limited circulation of the body but rolling sweetly and yet still returning through the infinite extent of China.'[1]

But to reinforce the belief in an external threat, a physical symbol is required. Mockingly, Kafka asks: ‘Against whom was the great wall to provide protection? Against the people of the North’. And then he adds: ‘But we know nothing else about these northern lands. We have never seen them, and if we remain in our village, we never will see them.’[2]

Once a wall becomes a symbolic boundary, nothing can tear it down, for the simple reason that people believe in it. In an essay written in 1932, Walter Benjamin concluded that the feeling of guilt pervading Kafka’s protagonists is the result of denying the ‘contemporary man’ the right to memory. Without the past, without the right to memory, humanity also loses the law. If the past is unknown, then justice can no longer be relied on in the present.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kafka and Benjamin experienced the dread of a future waiting just around the corner. They sensed that Europe had succumbed to an ‘aestheticization of politics’. That the world would learn to think in conditional clauses and metaphors. Through the prism of an aesthetic, imaginary world, reality would be expanded to the extremes of the imaginable.

Kafka and Benjamin feared that the past would be forgotten and that the present would be experienced as a dream. Through aesthetics, politics can persuade us to believe in what we know to be untrue. ‘The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for
contemporary man’, wrote Benjamin in 1932.[3]

‘Contemporary man’ adheres to these habits to this day. Life’s technological miracles also entertain us. All nature is wondrous, and thus anything, even the worst danger, can be turned into entertainment. The goal of life dissolves into an ‘endless horizon’. Freed of all ties, contemporary man finds a way of life ‘in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way’. [4]

The new wall

Benjamin’ essay ‘Experience and poverty’, written during his brief stay on Ibiza at the beginning of the 1930s, opens with a very important finding. After the ‘last war’ – World War One – Europeans had become poorer in terms of life-experience. Older people could no longer pass their wisdom down to the younger generation since they had returned mute from the fields of battle. This muteness was, of course, deepened by the Second World War. The combination of involuntary loss of memory and a systematic amnesia has marked the post-war period to this day.

To more easily forget what must not be remembered, Europeans have perfected the ability to live in imaginary worlds. It is easier to believe in what we have imagined than in what we have seen with our own eyes.

Because we were able to imagine a different reality on the other side of the Iron Curtain, we also believed in it, right up until 1989. Secretly, if not entirely seriously, we all thought that everything was completely different on the other side. The continent was split in two, although of course this wasn’t entirely true. The ‘Chinese wall’ through the middle of Europe was dotted with ruined watchtowers and unfinished barriers, but the division was nevertheless successful. Invisible bricks convinced us of two different stories that would never merge into a single whole.

When this symbolic wall was demolished, the dragon that had long spouted the fire of prejudice and exclusion was killed. The masses took down the Berlin Wall with their own hands, the fingers of individuals removed stones from the wall one by one. In November 1989, Benjamin’s ‘general strike’ took place in Berlin. Berliners showed the world that individuals can join together and are ‘capable of establishing legal relationships with the purpose of changing the old ones’. [5]

The east-west division of Europe was too artificial to last longer than a year or so after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ideological reasons for separation collapsed like a row of dominoes. But the utopia that was supposed to lay the foundations for a different society did not last long either.

We are now building a new wall; one that is stronger and much more dangerous. Today, Europe is participating in the construction of invisible global borders founded on prejudices more deep-rooted than those responsible for the ‘Red Menace’ and ‘western prosperity’. We see deepening differences between North and South. An ancient story that, a few decades ago seemed empty and completely forgotten, has been given new life.

The alliance of the Latin South, headed by France, against the north and its presence in
central and eastern Europe, was formed on the initiative of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007. The ideology behind the Union pour la Mediterranée was provided by Sarkozy’s French-Spanish advisor and self-styled ‘homme du midi’ Henri Guaino. As Wolf Lepenies commented in 2015, Guaino was ‘an avowed Eurosceptic and relentless critic of Brussels bureaucracy’, who believed that a coalition of Latin cultures would ‘curb the imperialistic tendencies of the Anglo-Saxon countries and Germany’. The contemporary rhetoric of division is perhaps even more effective than it was during the Cold War. We speak about the differences between North and South as though they explain everything. In the process, age-old prejudices rooted in literature and art again penetrate the European consciousness and shape how we think about the world.

North and South is one of those differences that we need in order to understand that the world is not uniform. But instead of remaining an abstract dichotomy, such as night and day, warm and cold, good and bad, we are compelled by political rhetoric to think of Europe as an island of civilization among the savages that threaten us.

**Muteness and longing**

Thoreau’s essay ‘Walking’ has started to circulate again in translation and as reprint. Thoreau writes about a man who explores the world on foot and, in this way, restores the human dimension which we clearly all miss in this age of airline flights and Wi-Fi. The most important thing is still the direction he recommends: you need to walk southwest, always southwest.

The tourism industry, one of the most successful branches of the global economy, rests on this longing for the South. Benjamin’s Eivissa – allow me to write the name of the island in the language of its inhabitants, which has become completely forgotten along the way – provides a shocking example of the transformation of the simple, subsistence society into a glittering tourist resort, today known only under its Spanish name Ibiza.

Photo from [Wallpaperflare](#).

It is almost impossible to imagine that, in the 1930s, the island was visited by German grammarians who provided the Catalan speakers with the means to comprehensively and precisely codify their own language. Lexicographers walked the rocky coasts among peasants, believing in a utopia: that the world disappearing before their very eyes could be recorded. The names of tools, implements and spaces in the rural island houses were all carefully stored in dictionaries that bore witness to the longing for the South – to the hunger for that ‘experience’ of authenticity that Benjamin argued we lack, despite our prosperity.

Of course, this kind of South does not exist. Just the opposite: social tensions worsen the further south one goes. But colonial power couldn’t completely destroy solidarity among those who have learned to survive in difficult circumstances. In contrast, over decades of prosperity, Europe has become even ‘poorer’ in Benjamin’s sense. We are ‘poor’ because we do not belong to our own people, because we are alienated from our own environment, and because we are wrapped up in ourselves. We blame others for this
'poverty', newcomers from outside, those who we suspect want to deprive us of our brave new world. But others are not to blame for this.

European ‘poverty’, that painful isolation, that chronic mistrust, was caused, as Walter Benjamin puts it, by our own muteness. Too much cruelty, too much silence accumulated in European hearts throughout the twentieth century for us to be able to pass on experience from one generation to the next. Men who, in their youth, experienced the trenches of the First World War did not tell their children and grandchildren about the noise of the shells. They came back mute. Our heritage is all these millions of mutes.

Pain took away the voice of victims, but the executioners kept silent too. Many were ashamed, others feared persecution. The majority of crimes have remained unknown because of an unspoken pact among the victors that the status quo must be respected. If anything truly marked the chill of the Cold War, it was this sealed silence. The continent of Europe was divided for decades, with a virtually impassable border drawn clearly through it. But on both sides the law was muteness.

Are we surprised that, all of a sudden, we don’t know how to talk about our own experiences? That we don’t know how to summarize a ubiquitous and vague fear? That we don’t know how, or don’t want to tell our children about the Curtain that defined our lives?

A culture of glass and steel

In ‘Experience and Poverty’, Benjamin noted how in the bourgeois salons of the 1880s there was a rule that all traces of person’s everyday existence should be invisible. Everything had to be in its place, neat and tidy, decorative and pleasing to others. From the beginning of the twentieth century, modern architecture then designed spaces that erased people’s traces on their behalf. A culture of glass and steel emerged, in which we still live.

Our passage through all those tunnels at airports, through disinfected hospital rooms and generic hotel rooms no longer needs erasing. No one anticipated that casual visitors would leave a trace behind. We travel so much, but it is as though we are walking along smooth rocks, leaving no footprints. Tourist and migration flows blend and become indistinguishable. We divide them into two mutually exclusive categories. But are they?

Refugee tents. Photo by Frantisek Trampota from Flickr.

Western metropolises crave the peace, kindness and warmth of the southern and eastern countryside, which in this respect are interchangeable. And in small villages somewhere at the margins, young people still dream – as I used to – of one day living in the city, where the streets never end.

Differences exist and there is no need to try to erase them. Without differences, there would be no knowledge. ‘The “barbarian” is created by civilization and needs it as much as it needs him’, wrote Yuri Lotman.[7] He had been exiled to the western edge of the Soviet empire, a circumstance he was able to put to good use. Language is based on
categories through which we ‘grope’ the world. We divide things into ‘large’ and ‘small’, people into ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, spaces into ‘open’ and ‘closed’; and we see ourselves as ‘free’ or ‘trapped’. But a person always lives in between, among those extremes.

Categories cannot be eliminated. Nor would it be wise to try. A far more important question is how to move among these entrenched opposites. We must ask if we are capable of travelling from city to village, from North to South, from West to East, without the journey appearing to us as moving from ‘light’ to ‘darkness’, or from a safe and comfortable world to an untamed wilderness.

Europe has not shaken off its prejudices since the fall of the Berlin Wall. It has not transcended its old ideal of itself as simultaneously continent and island. We Europeans remain trapped in our ability to produce categories that along the way change into legal norms and hate-filled slogans. But in doing so we overlook that there is something rotten in our kingdom.

**Europe is not an island**

The scene of the disaster, the mountainside that Flight 9525 crashed into, is familiar to me. Not as a landscape that I have crossed on foot, but rather the opposite: I know it from the air. I have flown this route so many times that I know it by heart. I know that somewhere in the middle of the Alps there is a vertical wall marking the boundary between North and South, a climatic boundary. Europe is clearly divided into northern and southern regions. But what does that actually mean?

There are two simple facts: Europe is not an island. And it was the differences that have made Europeans what we are: resourceful and adaptable, hard-working when necessary, and fun-loving – in the North and in the South, in the East and in the West. Europe draws its creative energy precisely from the fact that we are so different from one another.

There are always places that are the opposite of what we are used to. We live with this horizon of longing. We were raised to be explorers of the unknown. We have become accustomed to transcending our own boundaries, to fleeing from excessive familiarity and comfort. In the European tradition, foreign lands have always represented a challenge, something unattainable that one must strive for. As we know, this tradition also gave rise to conquerors who sowed woe and horror in distant places.

This same continent is now closing itself off, afraid of all that is different. It is surrounding itself with barbed wire, so that the Mediterranean has become a sea of anonymous death.

Europeans have wandered through and settled the entire world, have adapted to every climate, met every challenge. But at ‘home’, they are unable to face otherness. Why? Are the new arrivals too similar to us in their quest for a better life? Do we see in them the yearning that has emptied the European countryside?

The fear of being infected with the unknown is growing again. Like in the 1930s, an ideology of fear has been born across the continent, the seed from which every fascism grows. We still try to exclude this word from the labels we use to describe current
political developments. We hide behind euphemisms to conceal the all too familiar
tendency towards ‘the Law’ that would condemn all foreigners first to deportation and
then possibly to death. That has already happened in Europe.

What was for Franz Kafka a premonition, and what drove Walter Benjamin to fevered
essay-writing during his long exile, has materialized. And yet we still fail to hear these
warnings adequately. Today, the task is to speak openly to the free youth of post-1989
Europe of the ‘experience and poverty’ of the continent into which they were born.

Today, borders have disappeared from roads and motorways, yet remain clearly visible in
the corridors of airports, where for many a person freedom is impossible to attain
through a glass wall. The old continent has again created conditions for undocumented,
nameless, and invisible people to live right next to us, on the same staircase, in the next
street or at the end of our village. You needn’t see them if you don’t want to.

‘The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man,’ said
Wittgenstein. That is still true.

in karglichen Kreislauf des Körpers, sondern süß rollend und doch wiederkehrend durch
das unendliche China.’ Franz Kafka, ‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’ (1917),

wissen wir von diesen Nordländern nicht, gesehen haben wir sie nicht, und bleiben wir in
unserem Dörfe, werden wir sie niemals sehen.’” Ibid. 72.

Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut” (1933), Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge. Gesammelte


[5] ‘...die Streik zeigt, dass sie imstande ist, Rechtverhältnisse zu begründen und zu
modifizieren’. Walter Benjamin, ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (1921), Aufsätze, Essays,


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