

European interview

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“A European political and public space has emerged from the crises”

***Pandemonium* is the imaginary capital of the Underworld in writer John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Why did you give this title to your latest book?**

This choice is firstly linked to the start of the Covid-19 crisis, a hellish experience, with people dying in the corridors of hospitals, the military called to the rescue, patients transferred from one place to another. *Pandemonium* is also about noise, so the idea of public debate, of a clash of opinions, from which something new emerges, a political action that seemed to me to be specific to this crisis. And then I’m a writer and I couldn’t resist the pun with «*Pandemic*»!

With each crisis, some voices predict the imminent demise of Europe as a political project. How can this rhetoric of fear be explained?

It is fascinating. I’ve experienced it several times, with the euro crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit and now the public health crisis. I see two reasons for this. The first is that observers and even experts tend to underestimate the forces that hold us together. There are the economic forces: the internal market has played a decisive role in uniting the EU-27 vis-à-vis London. There is the monetary dimension: the idea that we could leave the euro zone has almost no credibility. It might therefore be suggested that the «*de facto solidarity*» dear to Robert Schuman works; the end of «Europe» would have a high economic price, the cost of which is unknown. Finally, even if it is less tangible and less quantifiable, there is a political will to live together, which remains strong, particularly in Germany and France; this involves a certain relationship with history, a recognition that a group of states shares the same space. This is what makes it possible in times of crisis to find the energy to act together, an energy that

sometimes surprises the heads of state and government themselves.

Why are Europeans not more aware of what binds them together?

The problem is that all of these things seem to be taken for granted now, we forget that they were sometimes painfully acquired. This is true for the economic fabric; it is true for peace on the continent. Various centrifugal and centripetal forces shape the European Union, but it is as if the centripetal elements have very few advocates, credible ones at least. This is where I see the second reason for the discourse about the end of Europe, and that is what I call «the prophets of doom», a tendency to exaggerate the danger when it comes to taking action. We are a Union, not a State, with divergent interests depending on the culture, history, and geography of each state. Political leaders therefore need to face a crisis before they feel they can move forward together.

The European Union has long been a dispassionate, bureaucratic space. How has it changed?

For very deep-seated reasons, Europe was created as a regulatory, depoliticised area, governed by law and expertise. The ability to defuse conflicts, to calm passions and to build a continental market is certainly a quality, but it can become a handicap when danger arises. Then it is necessary to act quickly, win over public opinion and show leadership. The old system was organised to take time, to be patient, to negotiate long and hard. This was done between experts, far from public opinion and the media, which was not a problem as long as standards VAT, compensatory amounts and other technical issues were discussed. Not so with the crucial issues that the

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European Union is now facing, such as security, identity, solidarity, finance, borders: these issues concern all citizens and not only the stakeholders dear to the Brussels bubble. A few years ago, some political scientists wrote that no national election had ever been decided on a European issue. This is no longer true; we have entered another world! Today there is a European political and public space that has emerged from all these crises.

You mention an «existential, Machiavellian moment» for the Union: it knows it is mortal and is starting to react in the short term. Is it possible to talk about a tipping point?

Yes, if you take ‘moment’ in the sense of a time of transition; I like to talk about a metamorphosis, with accelerations. Things really started to move in 2008, with the banking crisis, and then in 2010 with the euro: a dozen heads of government were defeated in elections in less than two years because of the decisions, or non-decisions, that had been taken at EU level. Then there was the migrant crisis which divided opinion. During the pandemic, it was as if all these painful experiences came to the surface and for the first time triggered bottom-up political decisions, called for by the public. There was a cry of alarm, a call for solidarity coming first from Italy, then from Spain and France, calling on Europe to act. This cry was louder than the lack of European competences in the field of public health, louder also than the very selfish reaction of the Member States (France included) that was witnessed at first. Notably Angela Merkel heard this cry. It was she, with the Franco-German agreement of 18 May 2020, who realised that her country could not afford to play the miser again, not only because it had to come to the aid of countries that were going through hell, but because it had to protect its own economic interests, protect its exports and jobs. There was much less German hypocrisy during this period than during the euro area crisis.

The pandemic has therefore greatly accelerated the evolution towards a shared destiny, what you call a European *res publica*?

Indeed, you can see interactions within a wide Euro-

pean public space which do not always take the form that theorists previously outlined. It cannot be said that it is intergovernmental when one public opinion addresses another directly; an attempt should be made to understand that something much more powerful, more interesting, more vibrant is happening. There were several examples of this during the pandemic. In August 2020, Italian mayors bought a page in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to call on Berlin to show financial solidarity. Two German ministers wrote several op-eds in the press of southern countries. The former Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, made appeals for help in the German and Dutch press. This is not unprecedented; the former Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, used this European public space in 2015 to try to shift the balance between discipline and solidarity, albeit without much effect. In his own unpleasant way, Viktor Orban talks about Europe, and not just about Hungary, when he tries to influence the migration debate with his crusader rhetoric and calls on the West to defend itself against the so-called «infidels».

Isn't the end of the 'permissive consensus', the complacent indifference of citizens to a large market that created jobs and wealth, more complicated to manage?

Political passion obviously goes both ways; citizens sometimes want to applaud, sometimes want to criticise. That is political life! This still proves very difficult for many in Brussels to understand. Let's take the example of the public health crisis: the decision to purchase vaccines jointly was one of the most far-reaching, almost revolutionary taken by the European Union, because the vaccine was the saviour, the light at the end of the tunnel. But the Commission underestimated the public's expectations and therefore the tensions, criticisms and passions that would be unleashed in the event of disappointment or problems. It is not used to being exposed to such an extent, to the heated media coverage that a public crisis brings, whereas in national politics you have to deal with one crisis after another.

The European project has been built up around two visions, geographical extension and communitarianism, a perpetual movement towards more competences and more member states. Did the founding fathers set Europe on the wrong path?

It would be foolish to say that they were wrong when they did one of the few things that could be done in their time. Those who are wrong are the ones who think that the same answer is still valid today. The founding fathers of Europe were men steeped in history, who had lived through one or even two world wars. They were acutely aware therefore of ‘historicity’, the fact that the world is constantly changing and that each generation must find its own answers. The method of building Europe was not only supposed to be good historically, but also morally, because it was supposed to lead to peace and that this future represented good. So, for a long time it was difficult to criticise certain aspects of it without being accused of being anti-European. However, there are many taboos associated with this period that must now be tackled head-on.

What are these “taboos”?

The simplest one to understand is that of the border. The Europe of the 1950s, and even of the Delors years, was the Europe without borders. This meant removing, dismantling, abolishing the borders between European countries, not just for economic reasons but also because the border was seen as a bad thing, a reminder of the past, a reminder of wars, divisions and therefore of evil. It was as if, to overcome the dangers of nationalism, a universalism, a cosmopolitanism, was needed, in which Europe would serve as a model for the whole world, in which Europeans would be ‘citizens of the world’. Europe was supposed to be an open space, and this space is indeed a godsend for those citizens who like to move around, to travel, trade, study abroad; but in the process it has neglected its protective function as a place, as a home. Moreover, no thought has been given to the question of external borders. Where does Europe stop, how far should it expand? The whole issue of space was left unsaid, and this has led to disasters. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia is partly linked to our lack of clarity on the subject. The same applies to Turkey,

where a situation of great ambiguity has been created. Nevertheless, thought is being given to the matter. Think of Frontex, which has become a more robust European border guard. Or think of international trade, with new requirements in terms of reciprocity and trade defence vis-à-vis the outside world, as opposed to open trade within our own single market. A very concrete difference is now emerging between ‘we’, Europeans’ and ‘the others, the rest of the world’. For the first time, there is even a European Commissioner responsible for «Promoting our European way of life».

What would you include in this European identity?

Firstly, values such as democracy, equality, and the rule of law can be included. But this does not exhaust the subject, the difficulties begin afterwards, for example regarding what distinguishes us from the Americans. It might be said that we occupy a space together that is neither Asia, nor Africa, nor America, nor the Arctic, that we have lived through eventful times together, historically, on this small piece of Eurasia, including two world wars. And it cannot be denied that Christianity is the religion that has shaped the way of life in Europe. In the Middle Ages, the Church structured society, people’s relationship with others, with life and death, with time; it also laid the foundations of the pre-modern political order, with its parishes and bishoprics, with the Pope at the top. Europe was then Christian in the societal and political sense, which is why today’s Europe is among other things ‘post-Christian’.

How can the Union’s plurality of values, which is also a European strength and uniqueness be managed?

I would distinguish two levels. When I speak of a conflict between values, I am doing so with a view of raising awareness that the world of tomorrow will be more difficult for Europeans than that of today or yesterday. It will no longer be self-evident to have security, prosperity and freedom at the same time. How will we react when we have to choose between contradictory demands from Beijing and Washington, for example if the Americans ask us to stop exporting to China? Will we have to accept this

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in the name of the protection the US offers us with NATO? Will we be prepared to accept the consequences for our citizens, in terms of jobs or climate negotiations? Or take migration. What should we do at the time of major crises and instability in the neighbourhood, between either opening or closing borders? How can solidarity and security be articulated? But let there be no mistake, plurality of values does not mean that everything is permitted in the Union. To some extent we must admit that Chinese President Xi Jinping can do what he wants at home, in the name of Realpolitik, but this is not the case for Viktor Orban. Hungary is a member of the European Union, and we must, for the sake of the fundamental values on which our identity is based, ensure that coherence is maintained between the member states.

The attacks on the rule of law in Budapest and Warsaw show that it is difficult to maintain this consistency. How can the European Union resolve the crisis with Poland, accused of questioning the primacy of European law and flouting the independence of the judiciary?

This crisis is obviously very difficult to resolve. Of the two problems you mention, the attack on the independence of the Polish judiciary seems to me by far the most serious. The future of Poland is at stake: will it remain a constitutional democracy or will it continue on the path to autocracy? This is a real headache for the Union, which defines itself as a club of democracies. The Polish attack on the supremacy of European law is a side issue. This is a very clever move on the part of the government, since it allows it to pose as the true defender of the homeland against ‘Brussels’, invoking - in bad faith - other European examples such as the rulings of the German Constitutional Court and even the Brexit vote. To make the supremacy of European law the main issue is therefore to fall into a trap that the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, is setting for the EU institutions. Political and financial pressure will have to be increased against the Polish government for its autocratic excesses, but without damaging the Polish opposition’s chances of winning in 2023. Ultimately, it is not the EU that will be able to «solve» this crisis, it is the Polish electorate.

[1] *Alarums & Excursions :
Improvising politics on the
European Stage, Agenda
Publishing, 2019*

You see the European Union as a kind of great public theatre. But the Union suffers from a lack of identification of its leaders. Can you explain this?

The metaphor of the theatre works for what I call, in my previous book[1], the ‘politics of the event’ – as opposed to the politics of rules which is played out more behind the scenes, without an audience. Only a few people can be the protagonists: the presidents of the Commission, the European Council, the European Central Bank and the German and French leaders, for the most part. It is clear that Angela Merkel has embodied Europe in recent years, perhaps more than Ursula von der Leyen, including in the rest of the world. When Emmanuel Macron gives his speech at the Sorbonne, he has no problem speaking to all Europeans at the same time. But these actors do not have a pre-written script; they have to improvise in the face of events. It is up to them to find the right answers to reach the public and match their words with their actions; this is all the more difficult, as expectations are not the same from one political culture to another. The narrative is the thing that will allow them to speak and act. I like what Hannah Arendt said: *«By acting and speaking, men reveal who they are»*.

How can this narrative with our shared but extremely conflicted history be articulated?

Any narrative has to be anchored in history, taking the long view, without denying everything that may have divided us in the past. The founding fathers decided in 1950 to take Europe out of history and time, to wipe out the past: wars, borders, identity. This was perhaps necessary to win their great wager, to initiate something utterly new; but this is no longer necessary today. History is moving forward and, as Europeans, we are no longer in the same place, either in time or in space. We are entering a new era that will be dominated by the global struggle between the United States and China for geopolitical primacy. It is going to be quite difficult for us as Europeans not to be vassalized by the Americans in a new cold war with China, as Australia already is. We must also review our relationship with our large neighbours, such as Turkey, Russia and the United Kingdom, and also with the Middle East and Africa. Migration, for example, does not present itself in the same terms for the United

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States; it is not their problem but ours when conflicts or wars close to our borders lead to major migratory flows.

Does the European Union have the will and capacity to become «a power among powers»?

The difficulty with these concepts is that we do not sufficiently separate the military aspect in the strict sense from everything else, the ambitions in the field of defence from those in the field of security in the broad sense. It is very easy to make fun of European military ambitions, because it is obvious that we will not be autonomous tomorrow, or even in ten years' time, and capable of defending ourselves militarily. However, there is a whole industrial aspect on which the European Union is already working and taking concrete decisions, for example in the field of rare raw materials, chips and semi-conductors. This also involves our strategic autonomy, of being able to produce or secure our supply chains. Amalgams must be avoided because this is detrimental to the quality of public debate. I must say that if in 2024 there is another Trump presidency, which cannot be totally ruled out if you listen to the Washington establishment, and if this

time Trump does decide to withdraw the US from NATO, all these discussions will go much faster; when there is an emergency – as the pandemic also showed –, many things that seemed unthinkable and impossible suddenly become thinkable and possible, necessary even. We had better think ahead and prepare for it!

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