



---

Europe's Marginalization. A Philosophical Threat?

Author(s): Markus Wirtz

Source: *Re-Thinking Europe. Book Series*. Volume 1 – 2011, pp. 56-63

Stable URL: <http://www.rethinking-europe.ugent.be/books/1/html/Wirtz.html>

## Europe's Marginalization. A Philosophical Threat?

---

Markus Wirtz

University of Cologne, Germany

The problem of Europe's marginalization is probably not one of the most prominent topics in contemporary political philosophy. Nonetheless, it is definitely worth taking a look at the philosophical implications of just such a *marginalization*. I use the term 'marginalization' in an internal sense (referring to European debates, such as the constitutional project) and in an external sense (referring to the role of the EU in future global politics). In the following essay, I will present a philosophical position in response to the issue of Europe's marginalization that will engage with the positions of J. Derrida, J. Habermas and P. Sloterdijk. My intention is not to give a detailed discussion of the *European* conceptions of these three thinkers but to refer to their arguments to develop my own thoughts about Europe's marginalization. Ultimately, my reflections can be situated somewhere nearer to those of Habermas than those of Derrida and Sloterdijk.

First of all, I will briefly describe the philosophical background of my paper (I). Then, I would like to explain why a marginalization of Europe as a political unity constitutes a real (and not only a philosophical) threat (II). A discussion of some contrary arguments that consider Europe's marginalization as inevitable will then lead into a futuristic thought experiment (III). And finally, I will make a plea for the necessity of continental regimes such as of the European Union (IV).

56

I

The philosophical background of my paper largely consists of three pairs of writings from several European (actually French and German) authors who all deal with something that can be described as the diagnosis of a *European crisis*. I speak of 'pairs' because the titles resemble each other although the contexts of their argumentation may differ a great deal. In the first of the three pairs – two texts from the first half of the twentieth century – the concept of crisis even appears in the title of the texts: "La crise de l'esprit" ("The Spiritual Crisis"), a small collection of two letters and one note ("L'Européen") from 1919 by Paul Valéry<sup>1</sup> and *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente*

<sup>1</sup> P. Valéry, "La crise de l'esprit" (*Essais quasi politiques*), in : *Œuvres*, T. I, Paris: La Pléiade, 1957, p. 988-1014).

*Phänomenologie (The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology)* by Edmund Husserl from 1935/36.<sup>2</sup> Both Valéry and Husserl share the conviction that there must have been something in the European spirit, which had enabled it to go so far in the exploration of the world. For their respective contexts, both identify a kind of decline and illness of the European spirit, which they also try to explain.

The next two texts are much younger. They share a perception of a state of uncertainty in which the European continent finds itself after the fall of the “iron curtain”. The first text is a small pamphlet by Peter Sloterdijk: “Falls Europa erwacht” (“In case Europa awakes”) dating from 1994.<sup>3</sup> Here, Sloterdijk proposes –as the subtitle says– some “thoughts about the program of a world power at the end of the age of its political absence”. Sloterdijk sees Europe’s essential characteristic as a “mechanism of imperial transfer” (“Mechanismus der Reichsübertragung”)<sup>4</sup> that has driven European history since the fall of the Roman Empire. According to Sloterdijk, the decisive question for future European politics in the post-bipolar world order is whether Europe will be capable of creating a new political form beyond that of the empire.<sup>5</sup> Evidently borrowing a concept from Nietzsche, Sloterdijk sees Europe as a continent with far-reaching aspirations after forty years of historical “absence” that would grant itself the right to make “big politics”<sup>6</sup>.

Curiously, the other text in this pair has almost the same title as Sloterdijk’s pamphlet: “Quand l’Europe s’éveilleira” (“When Europa Wakes Up”) by the French author Laurent Cohen-Tanugi, published in 2011.<sup>7</sup> But, instead of Sloterdijk’s rather speculative standpoint on history, Cohen-Tanugi deals more with concrete facts and political interpretations of the actual situation und future perspectives for the European Union.

The third pair of books brings together a collection of literary impressions from seven European countries written by the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger and a collection of small political writings by Jürgen Habermas. This pair differs from the other two because, in this case, the title of the second book refers explicitly to the title of the first one. With a subtle use of punctuation marks that seems almost deconstructive, Habermas transforms Enzensberger’s optimistic exclamation “Ach Europa!”<sup>8</sup> (with an exclamation

<sup>2</sup> E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, Husserliana VI, The Hague: Nijhof, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Falls Europa erwacht. Gedanken zum Programm einer Weltmacht am Ende des Zeitalters ihrer politischen Absence*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Sloterdijk, *Falls Europa erwacht*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Sloterdijk, *Falls Europa erwacht*, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Wirtz, „Der Begriff der großen Politik bei Nietzsche. Reflexionen zur Globalisierung des Übermenschen“, in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 1 (2004), p. 43-60.

<sup>7</sup> L. Cohen-Tanugi, *Quand l’Europe s’éveillera*, Paris: Grasset, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> H. M. Enzensberger, *Ach Europa! Wahrnehmungen aus sieben Ländern*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989.

mark) into the frustrated or pitiful sigh “Ach, Europa”<sup>9</sup> (with a comma). It is especially the article “European politics in a dead-end. Pleading for a politics of gradual integration”<sup>10</sup> in this collection that interests me here.

Finally, a treatise by Jacques Derrida called “The Other Cape” (“L’autre cap”)<sup>11</sup> from 1991 should be mentioned here as another relatively recent text that philosophically deals with the question of Europe’s future. Starting from the root word *cape* (from the Latin word *caput* = head), Derrida develops some fascinating familiarities between concepts and ideas: the geographical cape that Europe represents; the “captain” who represents the phallogocentric tendency in European history; the capital as the missing center of Europe, but also as the base of the European economic system that has to be re-thought after the collapse of communism; or, the capital duty of Europeans to assume the responsibility for their own history, opening themselves at the same time for the “other of the cape”, as Derrida says.

While the future of Europe in a globalized world appears necessarily uncertain and nebulous in the writings of Derrida and Sloterdijk, we might now – twenty years later – see this a bit more precisely as the threat of a growing marginalization of the European “cape”.

It is generally acknowledged that the twenty-first century will be (or might already be) more Asian and Pacific than European and Atlantic. Geopolitically, Europe finds itself in a marginalized position: dominant influences that will probably characterize world civilization during the next decades no longer seem to emanate from the European continent. The signs of Europe’s marginalization are multiple. They include internal political and economic problems as well as external indications. When it comes to the political constitution of the European Union (which is of course not identical to the European continent as a whole), it must be acknowledged that the constitutional process has been paralyzed since the negative outcome of the popular votes in France and the Netherlands in 2005. The Lisbon Treaty, finally ratified in December 2009, includes some of the institutional reforms initially intended in the constitutional treaty, but it obviously cannot compensate for the deficit in legitimacy that the EU as a political unit of 27 member states suffers from. The conviction of the founders of the common currency, the Euro, that a stronger political union would necessarily follow the currency union has not been

<sup>9</sup> J. Habermas, *Ach, Europa. Kleine Politische Schriften XI*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> J. Habermas, „Europapolitik in der Sackgasse. Plädoyer für eine Politik der abgestuften Integration“, in : Habermas 2008, p. 96-127.

<sup>11</sup> J. Derrida: *L’autre cap*, suivi de *La démocratie ajournée*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991.

verified by reality. Instead of closer cooperation in financial and economic questions, the EU member states have continued their very different national economic politics until the crisis of the Euro in 2010 made clear that a common currency is not quite compatible with opposing tendencies in European economies. The disturbing fact that –if we trust the opinion polls– a large majority of the German people could imagine going back to the good old “Deutsche Mark” shows that a common European currency did not effectively help to create something along the lines of a collective European identity. The danger of an erosion of solidarity between the nations of Europe following the Euro crisis has not yet disappeared; rather, this danger has been reinforced by the enduring lack of a European public comparable to that of the national publics. The absence of real political discourse on the European level that could supersede national debates is surely one of the reasons why the constitutional project failed after the expansion of the European Union to the East in 2004; but, paradoxically, exactly this European constitution which has been rejected in two important popular votes could have actually contributed to the creation of a European political discourse.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that the aforementioned problems – especially the lack of a European political public and harmonious economic and financial policies in the European Union – will still take a very, very long time to solve. But, time is just something that Europe really doesn't have! The breath-taking economic growth of China, as well as that of emerging countries like India and Brazil, and the fragilized position of the United States as the last super power will not allow European countries to continue to engage in egocentric behaviors and delaying tactics. If the European continent wants to play an important role in future global politics, which will certainly be dominated by the USA, China, Russia, India and other “continental” nations, it has no other choice than to move much more quickly to a closer form of cooperation, and even unification, of its national political publics. The only alternative to this is the long-term marginalization of the European continent – and indeed European civilization –, which will represent less than 5 or 6 % of the world population by the middle of this century. And, even if Europe might still be a prospering world region in an economic sense, it will not have a strong influence on the geopolitical level.

What we can observe at the moment is a fatal interdependence between an internal marginalization of the European topic in national political debates and an external marginalization of the European continent as a political unity. (The climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 was a very good example of European weakness in international negotiations). While the external marginalization is growing at an ever-faster rate, the internal marginalization of Europe is not a completely new phenomenon.

<sup>12</sup> See M. Wirtz: „Der lange Weg nach EUtopia. Zwei grundsätzliche Aporien europäischer Identitätsbildung und ihre mögliche Auflösung“ in: H. Heit (ed.) *Die Werte Europas. Verfassungspatriotismus und Wertegemeinschaft in der EU?* Münster: LIT, 2005, p. 231-242.

As the construction of the European Union from the 1950s up to now has always been a matter more of governments and administrations than of political movements or civil society, the European subject has never really gained a privileged place in the political consciousness of European citizens. “Europe”, too often identified with the abstract bureaucracy of Brussels, seems to evoke feelings of rejection and skepticism rather than affirmation and political passion.

### III

But, one might say that these two forms of Europe’s marginalization should neither be avoided, nor bemoaned. The fact that European affairs are not discussed in the same way as national affairs is simply due to the fact that there is no collective European identity. It is exactly this kind of argument that has also been put forward in public discussions about the European constitution. The crucial question here is: Does a constitution necessarily presuppose the collective identity of a nation (as argued, for example, by Dieter Grimm) or, on the contrary, does the collective identity of a nation presuppose a constitution (as argued by Jürgen Habermas)?<sup>13</sup>

The problem of whether something like a collective European identity exists (or not) was broadly discussed in the fields of sociology, political science, legal theory and philosophy during the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Personally, I agree with the principal argument of Habermas that a national identity is not something natural, but rather the result of communicative processes of mutual understanding among citizens guaranteed by a constitution and a political public. As the creation of modern European nations went hand-in-hand with the creation of political constitutions and public spaces, there is no reason why the creation of a European constitution and a European political public should not contribute to a collective European identity. It is wrong to believe that there are “natural” national entities or “peoples” independent of constitutions and medial spaces. On the contrary, these two elements are necessary for the stabilization of collective identities. And the European problem is that exactly these two conditions are still missing.

On the other hand, one could argue that Europe’s marginalization in external world politics is only a logical consequence of a very European principle, namely that of the liberty and equality of all human beings. Of course, ever since the proclamation of this principle during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, European politics has not

<sup>13</sup> J. Habermas: „Braucht Europa eine Verfassung? Eine Bemerkung zu Dieter Grimm“ in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996, p. 185-191.

<sup>14</sup> See C. Wiesner: „Die Identität Europas und die Balance zwischen partikularen und universalen Werten“ in ed. Heit 2005, p. 204-214.

at all respected these universal principles of liberty and equality. The history of European colonialism and imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is based on an unsolvable contradiction between the values of liberty and equality on the one hand and hegemonic politics on the other hand that often destroys the *otherness* of other cultures. The age of colonialism and imperialism corresponded with a historical moment in which Europe was not marginalized at all, but rather, as Hegel described it, the powerful center of the world.<sup>15</sup> But, at the same time, this center was never unified in and of itself. It was in fact comprised of differences, contradictions and antagonisms between leading European nations who found themselves in a perpetual struggle for power and influence. The whole history of imperialism can be understood as an extrapolation of internal conflicts between European nations and within European nations. But, during the age of European domination of the world, there was yet another European contradiction that was felt and expressed by European intellectuals such as Paul Valéry –namely, the contradiction between the marginalized geophysical position of the small European continent (a *cape* or an *appendix* of the Asian continent) and its political, scientific and technological dominance. The perception of this disparity between the physical size and the political and cultural power of Europe could even reinforce this feeling of European superiority over other peoples.

In his 1990 discourse “L’autre cap”, Derrida has re-interpreted some of Valéry’s thoughts concerning the destiny of Europe. It is interesting that Valéry, as Derrida extrapolates, considers the essence of Europe as being just a “small cape of the Asian continent” (“un petit cap du continent asiatique”<sup>16</sup>), while its appearance or its existence consists in being “the precious part of the terrestrial universe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a large body”.<sup>17</sup> And the main question (“cette question capitale”) that Valéry asks is: “Will Europe retain its predominance in all domains?”<sup>18</sup>

A few decades after Valéry’s question, we are in the privileged position of being able to give a very clear answer: No! The gap between the appearance of Europe and its reality is diminishing more and more. But, one might provocatively pose the question: Is this really so bad? Couldn’t it be that, in some sense, Europe’s marginalization in world politics is not a problem, but rather the solution for the threefold contradiction that I mentioned before?

Let me explain this. No rational person wants a politically dominant, hegemonic or imperialistic Europe anymore. I would even say that, if we think consequentially, in a political world based on the values of liberty and equality for all human beings, Europe

<sup>15</sup> See Sloterdijk, *Falls Europa erwacht*.

<sup>16</sup> P. Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit”, p. 995.

<sup>17</sup> P. Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit”, p. 995 (Translated by M. W.).

<sup>18</sup> P. Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit”, p. 995 (Translated by M. W.).

*should be* marginalized. Let me illustrate this –perhaps surprising– conclusion with a little thought experiment (which goes exactly in the inverse direction of the fundamental theorem that Paul Valéry used to explain his “capital question”<sup>19</sup>):

Imagine that in the year 2111, human rights are finally guaranteed and respected for every world citizen (first presupposition). At the same time, there are elements of direct democracy (let’s say, via the world wide web) that allow all world citizens to vote for their representatives in a world parliament or even to collectively make decisions about questions of universal terrestrial relevance (I am not saying that there would be no regional, national or continental parliaments any more, but I postulate the existence of a world-wide democracy as the second presupposition). Finally, the economic behaviors of world citizens are regulated by the principle that every world citizen has the same limited right to pollute the earth (I cannot treat the technical problems of such a regulation here, I simply ask you to accept it as the third presupposition). So, if we consider the three presuppositions together, what would be the position of European citizens in that world of 2100? As they have the same rights to pollute the environment as Asian or African people or anyone else, the differences in welfare and standard of living between different world regions would certainly be much smaller than they are now. And, as every world citizen has one vote in all world elections, the geopolitical influence of every region would depend primarily on the number of its citizens –which corresponds to democratic standards.

62

What we can learn from this thought experiment is that if global politics would take the European principles of liberty and equality really seriously, Europe would be automatically in a marginalized position. Its political influence would perfectly correspond with the relatively small number of its citizens, and there would no longer be any contradiction between the hegemonic politics of a particular world region and universal values.

#### IV

The problem is that we don’t live in the ideal world of this thought experiment, but rather we live in a political situation in which the most important questions of humanity (a fair distribution of essential goods, sustainable development, control of proliferation of arms of mass destruction and so on), are neither determined by supranational institutions (such as a World Parliament), nor by direct democratic decisions (via the Internet, for example). Instead, powerful national states and private organizations (profit-oriented companies as well as non-profit, non-governmental organizations) deal with problems that are mostly too small for national states and too important for individual organizations

<sup>19</sup> P. Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit”, p. 995f.



with their own private interests. So, what is missing on the global level of world politics – effective public institutions and more democratic participation – is exactly what is missing on the level of European politics.

It is from this point of view that the threat of a marginalization of the European subject within Europe becomes so dangerous in the contemporary situation. As Habermas has pointed out in several articles,<sup>20</sup> continental regimes like the European Union could constitute an intermediary sphere between the regional/national level and the global dimension of politics. And, as the EU is, at the moment, the oldest and most successful example of such a continental regime, the step-by-step unification of European national states (however with an uncertain finality) into “Europe” could be (and has already been) an example for other continental co-operations in Asia, Africa and South America. Consequently, the defeat of the European project would not only marginalize small European nations in future world politics, but also other world regions consisting of relatively small nations. So, if one defends a system of multipolar global politics that is not just dominated by a few continental nations such as the USA, China, India or Russia, one must also defend continental regimes like the European Union. In an ideal situation of world politics, Europe’s marginalization would not be a problem anymore because there would be more direct democratic participation for all world citizens and more supranational institutions preventing the domination of singular national states and profit-oriented organizations like big companies or banks. Not only would Europe be marginalized, but also the United States, China, India, Russia, etc. But, given the long path before us to reach this ideal situation, Europe’s marginalization represents a major danger: that the whole idea behind the European project fails and consequently the failure of the first attempt in history of creating a supranational organization that does not simply replace its members, but transcends them into to a new public space, serves as justification to abandon all efforts to establish more democratic and representative institutions. If we don’t manage to become *European*, how can we ever manage to become *Planetarian*?

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the articles collected in Habermas’ *Ach, Europa*.