

The International Spectator 3/2005

## Book reviews and Notes

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# Restless Europe? European Identity after the Iraq War and the Constitutional Referenda

Christopher Bickerton\*

*Free World. Why a crisis of the West reveals the opportunity of our time* / Timothy Garton Ash. - London : Penguin Books, 2005. - 256 p. - ISBN 0141016817

*Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War* / Daniel Levy, Max Pensky and John Torpey (eds). - London : Verso, 2005. - 256 p. - ISBN 1-84467-018-X

*Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* / Zygmunt Bauman. - Cambridge and Malden : Polity, 2004. - 152 p. - (Themes for the 21st century). - ISBN 0745634028

The first step would be to become restless...<sup>1</sup>

Since French and Dutch voters rejected the European Constitution in May and June 2005, most politicians and pundits have accepted that Europe has entered into a crisis.<sup>2</sup> In practical terms, the Constitution would have streamlined certain aspects of the EU's institutional framework, making the integration of the 10 new member states easier for instance. However, its real significance was political – it was to provide the process of European integration with a popular mandate for the twenty-first

\* Christopher Bickerton is a PhD student in International Relations at St Johns College, University of Oxford.

<sup>1</sup> P. Esterhazy, "How Big is the European Dwarf?", in Levy, D., M. Pensky and J. Torpey (eds) *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War* (London: Verso, 2005) pp. 74-9.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, "Spécial 29 mai", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 2117, 2-8 June 2005.

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century. The Constitutional Convention, set up following the EU Council Summit in Laeken in 2001, explicitly addressed the EU's most pressing problem – its democratic deficit, and its lack of legitimacy in the eyes of European publics.<sup>3</sup> The Constitution's failure has therefore pushed some deeper questions back onto the agenda: what is the EU for? Where is European integration going, and why should people be interested?

Of course, these questions are not new. The referendum results have posed the question of political legitimacy most starkly, but Europe has been grappling with this problem – in one form or another – for over a decade. Maastricht was a way of managing these tensions, without addressing directly the issue of a more “political” Europe and its relationship to domestic publics. Over the war in Yugoslavia, the absence of any common EU foreign policy led analysts and observers to ask what kind of actor the EU was on the international stage if it wasn't able to intervene and secure its own “backyard”. European monetary union, ostensibly a technical process of economic streamlining, became at the same time an occasion for launching a new symbol of

European unity – the Euro.

These events of the 1990s were driven by a search for new sources of legitimation. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the break-up of the Soviet Union stripped European integration of its raison d'être as a bulwark against Soviet “expansionism”. The peaceful reunification of Germany also pushed “the German question” off the geopolitical agenda. These events have forced European integration to justify itself on different terms, which has often proven too much for the political imagination of Europe's leaders. The dearth of ideas about the direction and purpose of European integration has pushed the old idea of “Europe as Christendom” back onto the agenda, much to the chagrin of Europe's mostly secular press and intelligentsia. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's attempt to include a mention of the EU's Christian heritage in the Constitutional preamble provoked schisms in Europe, the Catholic Poles on one side and the secular French on the other.

More successful in reviving the European project has been the “transatlantic rift”.<sup>4</sup> Simmering throughout the 1990s in the form of the banana and

<sup>3</sup> In the words of the Laeken Declaration, “the Union needs to become more democratic, more transparent and more efficient” since citizens “feel that deals are all too often cut out of their sight and they want better democratic scrutiny”. EU Council, “Presidency Conclusion” (SN 300/1/01 Rev 1). See annex to Summit Declaration <[http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/68827.pdf](http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/68827.pdf)>

<sup>4</sup> The term “transatlantic rift” is used interchangeably here with synonyms such as “split” and “divide”. For background on transatlantic relations, see William Wallace's article, “Can the Transatlantic Rift be Healed?”, *The World Today* essay in *The Observer*, 27 April 2003. <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/worldview/story/0,11581,942737,00.html>>.

beef trade wars, this confrontation reached its zenith with the famous speech to the United Nations Security Council in February 2003 by the then French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, a charismatic figure with a flair for the *grand geste*. In much of the press, and for American neoconservatives such as Robert Kagan, the split between Europe and the United States over the war in Iraq crystallized what were essential differences between the two continents. In Kagan's memorable phrase, Europeans are from Venus, whilst Americans are from Mars.<sup>5</sup>

In his most recent book, *Free World*, Timothy Garton Ash critically re-examines the split between the US and Europe. He compellingly argues that when looked at closely, the transatlantic split is actually not founded upon any deep disagreement between the two continents. It is rather the product of both political expediency and lazy journalese. Garton Ash doesn't deny that there is a crisis, indeed he labels it a "crisis of the West", the resolution of which will be, in his words, "the key to our future" (p. 3). However, his insight is that this crisis is really two distinct crises, which are occurring independently, but draw upon each other for strength and polemical power. For Garton Ash, the US is "divided by a

great argument about itself", whilst Europe is "divided by a great argument about America, which is, however, also a symptom of Europe trying to make sense of its own transformation" (p. 187). The unfortunate result is that in the course of these respective arguments, what Garton Ash labels "the narcissism of minor differences" is magnified, and essentialised (p. 183). Much of Garton Ash's attention is therefore devoted to unbundling the Kagan-stoked myth. In his words, "a simple dichotomy between a European model and an American model, European values and American values, is impossible to sustain, even if you look only inside the extended family of the West. There are almost as many contrasts within an ever more diverse Europe, and within an increasingly polarised America, as there are between Europe and America" (p. 182).

In recasting the transatlantic split in terms of internal existential crises, rather than any fundamental clash of interests, Garton Ash makes a valuable contribution to the debate. In his discussion of contemporary threats, he points out that in most cases the Europeans and the Americans are either in agreement, or one side is not interested enough to disagree.<sup>6</sup> Recent events, such as the consensual G-8 summit held

<sup>5</sup> R. Kagan, "Power and Weakness", *Policy Review*, Summer 2002.

<sup>6</sup> From the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, where the EU's Solana was seen as pro-Arafat, compared with a US administration that publicly defended Ariel Sharon as a "man of peace", to Iran, China, North-South economic relations and climate change, Garton Ash suggests that disagreements are less about substance than about form, about means rather than ends. As he points out, "the division of labour between a European 'soft cop' and an

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in Gleneagles, has strengthened Garton Ash's overall claim that "it is impossible, on sober analysis, to discern any major differences of long-term interest between Europe, America and the other rich and free countries of the West... the differences are of historic ties, identities, perceptions and approaches" (p. 183-4).

### **"European unity or Guatemala" – the only choice for Europe?**

Yet, the strengths of *Free World* are also its limitations. In minimising the differences between the US and Europe, Garton Ash doesn't directly address the reasons for the "crisis of the West". It may be that there are no objective reasons for a drifting apart of Europe and America; yet this begs the question of why a subjective sense of crisis has been most powerfully felt, and taken on board, by analysts, academics and politicians. This susceptibility to crisis Garton Ash dismisses as navel-gazing, yet it would seem to be a dominant strain within contemporary Western consciousness. Might not the crisis-talk in international politics have something to do with the wider reception given today to millenarian thinking, witnessed in the acceptance of apocalyptic environmental scenarios, and the deep-seated suspicion of scientific experimentation, from genetically modified food to cloning?<sup>7</sup>

American 'hard cop' can be effective, even though – or perhaps especially because – it is less a calculated double-act than two cops genuinely disagreeing about the best way to handle the suspect" (p. 154.)

<sup>7</sup> For a critical account of such thinking, see F. Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk Taking and the Morality of Low Expectations* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Garton Ash recognises that the "transatlantic rift" is above all existential, and reflects a search, both in Europe and the US, for an overarching framework of meaning to be given to international politics. From the "end of history" to the "clash of civilisations", the search has been on for such a framework. However, rather than investigate this dynamic between political elites, domestic publics, and the elusive political framework that can bridge the divide between these two constituencies, Garton Ash provides his own moral salvo. With *Free World*, Garton Ash hopes to breathe new life into a seemingly moribund Western alliance, showing that Europe and America have common interests and face common threats that could provide as much coherence as the Red Army did in the past (Chap. 4, "The New Red Armies", pp. 138-85). Thus, having dismissed the transatlantic split as mere narcissism, Garton Ash goes on to provide the West with a new mission that will carry it into the twenty-first century. He does at the level of the "free world" what he criticises others for doing at the level of Europe and America.

This rallying cry for unity tends to reduce political debate to a form of Western indulgence. Instead, it is worth looking at the divisions more closely, and asking whether within such

divisions there exists in embryonic form a European identity worth nurturing. This is the theme of the edited collection put together by Daniel Levy, Max Pensky and John Torpey, which reproduces a series of articles published by European intellectuals in May 2003. At the demand of Jürgen Habermas, who co-authored an article with the late Jacques Derrida, these public figures reflected upon the impact of the Iraq war on Europe.

This series of articles initiated a debate across Europe and provide rich material for testing the intellectual waters in Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A common theme is that the moment has come in which European integration, if it is to go any further, must ground itself in a genuinely *European* identity. While political integration occurred through the back door in the 1990s, this isolation is no longer tenable. Either there is an incipient European demos that can bear the weight of a political Europe, or European integration will come to a standstill.<sup>8</sup>

Writers and commentators from both the political left and right claim that, given the current balance of forces internationally, global stability is at stake: with the dominance of US power, only a united Europe can provide the necessary *contre-puissance*. European political integration is a necessity for both Europe and the world. Richard

Rorty puts the case forcefully in his claim that "the EU is the only likely sponsor of an alternative to Washington's project of permanent *pax Americana*" (p. 37). Umberto Eco makes a similar argument, with an even greater sense of urgency: "in order to survive, so to speak, Europe is condemned to find common strategies for foreign policy and defence. Otherwise it will become, no offence to anyone, Guatemala" (p. 20).

This political imperative to counter-balance a hegemonic US has pushed European intellectuals to consider, in more detail than ever before, the possible foundations of a European identity. The difficulty of this task is well captured by the Swiss writer Adolf Muschag. In his words, "the question of Europe is akin to St Augustine's question regarding the nature of time: as long as he was not asked what it is supposed to be, he knew what it was; if he was asked, however, he didn't know what it was at all" (p. 24). Habermas and Derrida argued in their original article that the Iraq war was a defining moment, in so far as opposition to the war saw demonstrations held simultaneously across Europe, a sign in their words of "the birth of a European public sphere" (p. 4). They substantiate their claim by considering the vital elements of a *European* political identity, elements drawn from what they define as a

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the European constitution and the importance of an as yet elusive demos, see C. Bickerton, "Euro-elites desperately seeking demos", 21 February 2005 <<http://www.spiked-online.com/Printable/0000000CA8F1.htm>>

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European legacy. The elements they identify, from secularism to multilateralism, are accurately labelled by Garton Ash as "Europe as Not-America" (*Free World*, p. 56). However, there is an aspect of Habermas and Derrida's argument which Garton Ash misses. His claim is that Habermas and Derrida are guilty of reductionism, and of ignoring the diversity within Europe: "like nation-builders of old, Habermas and others are *attributing* to a very diverse human community commonalities that do not yet exist, in the hope that this will help those commonalities to emerge. The 'European model' is a prescription based on description" (p. 76).

This charge is misplaced, as it misses what is critical to any political identity – its indeterminacy. Habermas and Derrida recognise this in their claim that "distinguishing between the legacy we appropriate and the one we want to refuse, demands just as much circumspection as the decision about the interpretation through which we appropriate it for ourselves. *Historical experiences are only candidates for self-conscious appropriation, without such a self-conscious act they cannot attain the power to shape our identity.*" (*Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe*, p. 10. reviewer's italics). Any political identity, in these terms, involves a conscious articulation of a particular vision, and one which has to engage with the world that has created it. Only through such a conscious act today will Europe's political identity of tomorrow be born. Garton Ash, in criticising Habermas for confusing description and prescription, misses this moment of indeterminacy,

which is at the same time the moment of intervention, of choice, of appropriation. All political identities, in this way, are prescriptive.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his recent essay on Europe, presents an argument which brings out the point made by Habermas and Derrida. Bauman claims that the term European does not point to any geographical entity; rather, it is a subjective disposition, a certain way of being in the world. Thus, Bauman argues: "Europe is not something you discover; Europe is a mission – something to be made, created, built. And it takes a lot of ingenuity, sense of purpose and hard labour to accomplish that mission" (p. 2). What Bauman is alluding to is a particular tradition, which is European only in so far as it first originated in Europe for a set of historical, and largely contingent, reasons. For want of a better term, this tradition is that of Enlightenment humanism. Bauman provides the example of Heidegger's account of culture: as a movement from the "dark expanses of *zuhause* (that is 'given to hand' and given to hand matter-of-factly, routinely, 'unproblematically')" to "the brightly lit stage of *vorhanden* (that is, the realm of things that, in order to fit the hand, need be watched, handled, tackled, kneaded, moulded, made different than they are)" (p. 8). The key here is that culture is understood as "the discovery that *all things human are human-made* and that they would not be human things otherwise". (p. 9, author's italics). The same can be said of Europe's own identity: it is not something that can be defined

in terms of the past, but is rather, an identity *à venir* ("to-come").

This indeterminacy is evident in Bauman's own attempt to provide a list of the main features of Europe's identity. Rather than providing any values *a priori*, or searching for content in Europe's social and political traditions, Bauman opts for open-ended, procedural values: rationality, justice and autonomy. Put together, these values amount to an awareness of one's own historicity, of one's existence as a conscious being who actively shapes and reshapes the world, as a being that is both a product of and a force for change in that world. This is what Bauman captures in his definition of autonomy as "the awareness that all [the] ways and means [of an autonomous society] have only the will of its living members to rest upon".

This understanding of autonomy is contrasted with its opposite – heteronomy. Drawing upon the work of the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, Bauman describes heteronomous societies as "those which incorporated in their institutions an idea not to be contested by their members: the idea that their institutions are not human-made, were not created by humans, at least not by humans who are alive at the moment, and therefore cannot be unmade or even reformed by the humans who are alive at the moment – as 'there is no alternative', the favourite

excuse of present-day political actors" (p. 128).

Considering recent events in Europe, one is tempted to suggest that Habermas and Derrida were too quick to point to the antiwar movement as the stirrings of a European demos. After all, much of the force behind the antiwar movements came from a desire to step out of the political process, to absolve oneself of responsibility for events underway. Such was the meaning behind the slogan "Not in my name". These movements endorsed the position of "there is no alternative", and sought simply to distance themselves from what was perceived as an inevitable eventuality. In contrast, the recent No vote in the constitutional referendum was of a different order. In this case, the Constitution was presented as a *fait accompli*, as a document not to be remade or unmade, but as one to be accepted as it is.

The No vote can therefore be understood as a rejection of the politics of "there is no alternative". Voting No contained the indeterminacy that is inherent to political decisions, it was a step into the dark but one motivated by a refusal to accept a political *fait accompli*. To paraphrase the Hungarian author, Peter Esterhazy, it may be that the results of the referendums are the first signs of a European public becoming restless. If this is the case, interesting times may lie ahead.