

LES CAHIERS D'EUROPE 21

How to reactivate political thinking?

Philippe Herzog maps deep reflection on history and philosophy with rich personal and collective experience to give us a lucid and fascinating analysis, and compelling reasons to restore a sense of commitment.



«When I entered politics, we were all inspired by ideals. We had ambitious projects and sought ways to pursue them. Today this has all disappeared», says Philippe Herzog. «A series of unprecedented crises and transformations have shaken our civilisation. Our 20th century has seen world wars, scientific revolutions and the end of communism. The great waves of globalisation and digital technology now lead an anthropological and cultural revolution that is placing the future of humanity in jeopardy. Our education system is collapsing,

the economic and financial system and liberal representative democracy are in crisis, war is raging in Ukraine. Yet these sobering realities and challenges are at odds with the prevailing mentality and institutions. The ideals of European humanism lie behind us. Can we regenerate them? Can we acknowledge the flaws of reason and correct them? It is our collective duty to tackle the difficult and shared challenge of reactivating political thinking.»

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Culture above all

Culture encompasses and inspires our activities. It is rooted in our institutions. By “culture” I mean the representations of people and of the world, sources of hope and prejudice shared by societies beyond their divisions. Traditionally, culture is also a task. It falls to everyone to care for humankind and for our souls, to question the fundamental values of truth and goodness and the principles that guide reason. This task is the mother of all reforms.

A broken history

But our traditions no longer carry authority. We are living the end of the very long historical cycle of European culture. It has been illustrious, and it has seen disasters. What kind of future can we expect without a new cultural project with common meaning? A better understanding of modern developments is necessary to adapt the ways we think and act.

Perspective on how our culture is constructed and has evolved lends our thoughts structure. I, for example, find inspiration in Karl Jaspers. In their desire for freedom, Europeans have used science to make history¹. But Europe has divided into rival states, and although our European culture precedes that of each country, each nation asserts its own identity.

Historians and philosophers give a rich understanding of this journey. The Annales school teaches us that Europe is a civilisation born of the long period of Roman Empire decay². It emerged from the ancient world in the west and north of the Mediterranean at the cost of constitutive fractures and drawing on Greek and Jewish spiritual resources, passed on and renewed by Rome and Christianity³. Hannah Arendt explains how Augustine opened a new era of freedom in the 4th century AD, appealing to personal conscience and renewing the ethics of love and truth. It marked the era, and Christianity has remained the figurehead of European culture for twelve centuries. Rome, with its laws and republican model, became a multi-secular reference. But the space was fractured into feudalities, and Lucien Febvre found no written traces of an awareness of European identity until the dawn of the Renaissance in 1477, when Philippe de Commines, chronicler to Louis XI, voiced his pride at having travelled through and discovered the different countries of Europe. A pan-European humanism then unfolded, described as the Republic of Letters. The 16th century saw the birth of the modern era, and the world was discovered in its entirety. Philosopher Descartes was the first to propose a method for “rightly conducting one’s reason and seeking truth in the sciences”. He believed it would afford people the means to establish a certain truth, to become masters and possessors of nature. The spirit of the Enlightenment then conquered the whole continent.

But it is striking how short this golden age was. The French Revolution came, then Napoleon’s imperial era and the industrial revolution. The most powerful states used burgeoning technologies to methodically conquer the world. Imperialism, colonialism and world wars ensued. The trial of the Enlightenment began with Hölderlin and Balzac and continued with Albert Camus, among many others, who called for regeneration. Which did not happen.

We are still priding ourselves, in the 21st century, on our modernity. Or we speak of postmodernity. These are ideologically vague words that do not fit with our era.

Our approach to life has changed. Europeans no longer aspire to the divine. On declaring the death of God, Nietzsche triggered an earthquake of immeasurable magnitude. Humans sought to become their own creator, and so began a nihilism of the transcendental values instilled by previous traditions. Science has also changed. Ours is a deeply materialistic era that has unburdened itself of religion and metaphysics⁴. Science continues its compelling momentum, but is confused with technical applications. Its mathematical language has become inaccessible to most and the gap between research and education is huge. Efficiency reigns. The grip of the tech industry and growth of its highly addictive products is increasing, and it is a proven factor in mental health degradation and depression in the young. Europeans’ affinity with history has deteriorated everywhere. Who talks about “making history” anymore? Footballers and top athletes do. Our President would like to. But history as a political project lies shattered.

New mentalities hold great promise of course, with for example the emancipation of women, a new approach to nature, and the fight against racism. But globally, and in politics in particular, the past pushes us towards a horizon made all the more dangerous because our future is obscure⁵, and science fiction proposes dystopias. We are living in a hybrid period: while one civilisation is dying, another is seeking its identity. A situation comparable to that of the 1st century AD, when the Roman Empire began to break down⁶.

Monique Castillo queries the feasibility of a renaissance⁷. It would mean reviving the spiritual resources of the past while at the same time working to surpass them. There is no place for nostalgia because the new world-system has produced other civilisations, and we must look to our future from the perspective of a world civilisation.

Educate and re-educate

The birth of a European Community should have included a promise to regenerate culture. However, education has fallen within the exclusive jurisdiction of

the states since the Treaty of Rome. I experienced the European institutions' wilful abandonment of a cultural project at the end of the 1990s and in the 2000s. It is a crippling flaw. Each state fosters its own national memory, each nation fears migration, and there is no agreement on religious roots. France remains deliberately introverted, national memories elsewhere also look inwards. In an extensive survey conducted for the Council of Europe, Alain Lamassoure points to the collapse of history education in Europe. It is non-existent in one half of the member countries, and has no temporal depth in the other. This is a clear and frightening sign of lost awareness and of the abandonment of an aspiration for a political Europe.

Re-education is necessary at all ages, in all social categories, in a professional context and throughout our lives. It must encourage critical thinking and teach love of others. State and EU institutions should not and must not be responsible for promoting such an educational project. Numerous decentralised initiatives are required at the local, regional and national levels, as well as within the Union and beyond, involving cross-border cooperation between consenting countries. Nonetheless, the EU would need to support them. Erasmus is important, but not up to the challenge.

Literary, cinematographic and scientific sources are excellent vehicles for understanding what it means to be European. And we must not avoid the issue of religion. François Jullien teaches us that we are not required to believe in God to appreciate the philosophical wealth of Christianity, understood to be one of the great paths of reflection on what a true and good life might be. He offers a brilliant interpretation of the Gospel of John ("I am the way, the truth and the life")⁸. Although I do value the tension between faith and reason as a means of inspiring transcendence.

Art is of course a crucial resource. It is timeless. It endlessly questions our human existence, inventing new forms to capture its beauty and encourage self-awareness⁹. Similarly, teaching the history of science encourages constructive doubt, to reactivate the principles most capable of guiding reason.

The issue of education is now inextricably linked to that of the digital revolution. Which the neo-Marxist thinker Paul Boccard terms as not merely technological, but also informational. For one thing, it has radically changed

our relationship with tools, considered previously an interface between humans and nature for the purpose of producing goods. Informational technology is now replacing the human hand and its mechanical functions, and even certain sensory and brain functions. Yet our knowledge of the brain is imperfect. And our knowledge of how these new techniques will affect it is barely embryonic. Furthermore, information is not a consumer object like any other because it circulates. In so doing, it can enrich us as humans and our relationships with others, or just as easily destroy us. These changes are today accelerating with no conscious awareness of the risks. By all accounts, it will take a catastrophe for us to wake up to the reality. The current invasion of social networks is crushing all the Enlightenment codes of thought and action. It is all very well to say we must educate people to use them properly, in reality everyone must fend for themselves. Young people are victims of the illusion of freedom, adopting a libertarian view of new media applications devoid of ethical and social principles. When we entrust an "artificial intelligence" with the task of writing an essay for a student, as a supposed source of help, we are killing their capacity for intellectual effort. The same applies to proposals on metro billboards for learning a language under hypnosis. For promoters of such practices, artificial intelligence becomes an "artificial general intelligence", inventing languages and tools capable of carrying out all sorts of human activities, be it invention of scientific knowledge or promotion of irresistible cybercrime. The machine becomes God. When some of these champions speak of taking a break, our politicians, dumbfounded, say nothing. In reality, there is no break in sight. On the contrary. We will have to design and organise information and communication as public goods, subject to general interest obligations. A metamorphosis.

My friend François Vezin tells me that polytechnicians are Descartes' grandchildren. I am convinced of this and like to remember comrade Auguste Comte, one of his most fertile offspring. Concerned about the contribution of theology and metaphysics, he integrated them into a religion of sciences, a kind of ultimate stage of what he termed the Great Being of Humanity. It was a scientific utopia, but would it make more sense to now ask Descartes' grandchildren to lead a technological revolution without regenerating its spiritual foundations? Many of us are resisting, we can do better.

Regaining control of the economic and financial system

We feel profoundly and desperately powerless against the grip of our contemporary economic system. Who does not see this? Is anyone satisfied with the soothing words spoken by leaders? How can people and society regain control?

Was Karl Marx wrong to stigmatise the exploitation and alienation of workers? The history of "real" communism shows how the suppression of the market and the abolition of liberal capitalism proved catastrophic, it is true, but must we not transform their

foundations? Capitalism has by no means solved the problem of values, quite the contrary. Corrosion of the long tradition of the value of work has worsened, and Italian trade unionist Bruno Trentin was right when he said the crisis of the political left is rooted in its failure to address the issue of work. Many suffer today from work they perceive as being of a low quality, even humiliating. As Nobel Prize winner Kasuo Ishiguro said of artificial intelligence, I see no “humans in the loop”.

We need a new type of human development and productivity everywhere but have no satisfactory answer. On the contrary, today’s capitalism is degrading people as well as nature. And it is multiplying unproductive and speculative accumulation of capital, when we should be developing human faculties and drastically reducing unproductive modes of accumulation and waste of material resources.

Ambivalence and the systemic crisis in capitalism

From its very beginnings, the European capitalist system has found justification in its undeniable and sometimes admirable power of innovation. Europe is the continent of “invention of invention”¹⁰ and the West draws its power essentially from its technological lead. While it is true that this has raised our standard of living and brought a degree of well-being, more people say they are happy in Bangladesh, for example, than in France. We have no recipe for a good life, progress here is not cultural. And let me get this one thing straight: no society can claim cultural superiority over another. Admittedly, the West has upheld ideals of social justice, and its economic growth has allowed many to escape poverty, but not without deep inequalities that are becoming structural in nations, reduced only by enlightened social struggles. The West is not quick to recognise that it has benefited from an enormous accumulation of capital through predation of many parts of the world, and benefits still from unequal exchange.

Yet the Western capitalist system is open and self-renewing. In the decades following the 1929 crisis, state intervention allowed its significant transformation. Karl Polanyi divulged the key contributors to this transformation: labour, land and money. Previously commodities, they became public goods¹¹, making new societal choices possible. However, over the last forty years or so a new systemic change has taken place with globalisation. Chains driving the internationalisation of production have been set up in world markets, used to foster a “free and undistorted” competition in fact allowing large private technological and financial groups to take monopoly positions. Neoclassical and Friedmanian ideology has won out, its source of wealth creation being financial

assets over labour. Myths heralding the end of work circulated as financial markets soared. Having has taken precedence over being, as we scrutinise the stock market daily like the followers of a cult to which we must submit.

This system is profoundly unstable, it distorts innovation and widens the gap between the top and bottom of the social ladder. There is plenty of money for the proclaimed High Tech, but the cost of capital required to finance productive investments and essential public service infrastructure, deemed too risky by high finance, is prohibitive. We owe the recurrent financial crises and renewed inflation to over-accumulation of private capital in search of quick and very high profits, combined with slower real economic growth. The 2008 financial crisis was already a public and private debt crisis, and since then debts have doubled again; Jacques de Larosière denounces a “financial illusion”, the very large fortunes have swelled while financial assets assume a growing role in corporate balance sheets¹².

None of this would be possible without the ultra-indulgent policies of central banks and governments. Monetary policies have boosted the financial profitability of private capital by providing liquidity and crushing interest rates to negative levels. National debt has swelled, particularly to take on social stability missions “at any cost”. But we, as individuals, are covering the costs of both the debt burden and the bailouts of financial institutions when crises hit. “We are paying the price for decades of easy money,” says Larry Fink, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of leading asset management firm BlackRock. In the words of FT analyst John Thornhill, “tech tycoons favour the privatisation of profits and the socialisation of losses”¹³, mocking the libertarians lurking in the financial fox’s den when it becomes apparent that the people must foot the bill. A new global and financial crisis is now looming, which despite soothing words may very well sweep us into an unprecedented storm.

I expressed my astonishment at the silence from European governments surrounding our dependence on the financial markets and its consequences in an article published one year ago¹⁴. Our states are hostages and accomplices of this system.

European states are market rivals and deeply unequal. Germany, a major exporting power, is accumulating asset, and solidarity holds no value in the Eurozone’s baptismal funds. France has become seriously de-industrialised, through its own fault, and figures among the debtors potentially at risk of default. Germany’s unilateral decisions to increase its use of gas and coal to compensate for its withdrawal from nuclear power and to oppose the reform of a blindly short-termist European market have deepened the energy crisis. And France was immobile for more than twenty years, except through the voice of associations like Confrontations Europe and Les Entretiens Européens, led by

Claude Fischer-Herzog. Our proposal to construct a solidarity pact between European countries that have different energy mixes but want to invest in the development of a decarbonised baseload electrical energy accessible continuously to all, such as nuclear power, would pave the way for a real energy community¹⁵.

The World Climate Conferences are failing because the most powerful states see only their own interests and development funding for poor countries is in disarray. The United States has decided to consolidate its industrial base on its territory with considerable financial resources, using the ecological imperative as its pretext. France and Europe need massive public investments to rehabilitate production spaces and living environments, yet the current political economy is not following this path at all.

Despite recent efforts, the European Union has no budget, no investment fund and no industrial strategy. Its outdated competition policy favours the strong over the weak, and it is making a fool of itself in the face of America which unilaterally imposes its priorities and enjoys the scandalous privileges of its dollar.

France benefits from the euro, which protects it from the old shocks suffered under the devaluation of the franc, although it is also responsible for its budgetary and industrial excesses. We should be giving top priority to public investment in basic infrastructure for social and economic services of general interest. But they are not “profitable” for business and they are victims of over-administration and corporatism.

Systemic reforms: governance, efficiency criteria and public-private partnerships

The current crisis is affecting all three dimensions of the economic system: objectives, regulation and structures (stakeholders and networks). There is a lot of talk about regulation, as if the role of the states and of the European Union is simply to better regulate the market and its companies, when in reality regulation and more specifically all current institutional governance is part of the problem.

Institutional objectives do not result from a collective effort involving society, as for national planning. Today’s rulers have an exorbitant delegation authority. We let them do our thinking for us. Under these conditions, society cannot take ownership of the often vague and contradictory objectives. Governments expect companies to achieve them while the state clings to its role of saviour. Increasingly, however, their rules then impose controls on individuals, which weigh (unevenly) on businesses. We must review the efficiency criteria of both administrations and companies to ensure consistent regulation. The preposterous increases in rules, labels and incentives

are clearly failing to reduce resource wastage and develop human capacity.

The business community is divided in two. On the one hand, there are the large multinationals, which make major investment choices concerning the whole of society and are often steps ahead of state regulation. Most firms are required to align their management with the interests of financial asset holders. And there are the masses of SMEs, subject to conditions similar in some respects to those of the proletariat.

If we are to achieve a new and more coherent systemic regulation, we will need to redefine the major development objectives and undertake structural reforms of both the state and corporate sector with a view to establishing complementarity. A new mixed economy hangs in the balance, where a decentralised and de-bureaucratised state partners with private companies to revive investment in all major areas of public interest. Shareholding structures, public-private partnership contracts and a capital incentive tax would be set up for this purpose. The information system must also change: we need national and European infrastructures that pool data to promote long-term investments while sharing its costs, risks and benefits, instead of leaving information and finance under the overwhelming control of globalised data processing giants and large financial investors. Industrial cooperation building would be organised by dedicated agencies.

How we use information is an important aspect of our democratic crisis. We conform to conventions involving basic science and the state, the corporate sector or indeed any group that requests it. But the amount of information required for digital apps is multiplying and statisticians are having to quantify more varied and increasingly complex situations. Enormous work goes into processing, correcting, adapting and aggregating data, yet its producers and users are not all concerned with the truth. Megatonnes of data are generated, which we consume and disseminate as we see fit. Take the example of pension forecasting: the Pensions Advisory Council has always downplayed the problem of financing and does not provide real projections. Even the social and economic sciences are regularly drowned in econometrics, they divide into rival chapels and are unable to confirm the pertinence of manipulated figures.

My thoughts turn again to the national planning system as it stood after the Second World War, why it was abandoned, and with what consequences¹⁶. A collective framework involving the whole of civil society and state representatives made essential choices in favour of full employment, industrial development and public services. Long-term forecasts led to the programming of major public investments. But tensions rose between the Commissariat Général au Plan economic planning authority and the French Ministry of

Economy and Finance, which, facing adverse circumstances, had difficulty accepting the budgetary constraints on its investments. The Ministry triumphed, the Commissariat au Plan fell into disarray, and programming of long-term investments was reduced or came up against formidable obstacles from all sides.

Ours is a different era, but it is important that we take up the challenges of foresight and planning once again. It must be decentralised, to shed light on ways of regenerating housing and production in different regions. It must also be concerted, to create a synergy of cooperation between the regional, national and multi-national levels of the European Union. This

implies co-responsibility for investments in all areas relating to public goods. We need to develop these multi-level links beyond the current bureaucratic and short-term constraints, without sacrificing the future for the present. We should organise a yearly conference on the Union's economic and social policies in each member country and convene in Brussels.

The foresight and planning work must spotlight the need to massively increase resources for scientific and statistical research. They must propose ethical principles for the production and use of data. From primary school onwards, basic knowledge of economics and statistics should be introduced.

Rethinking freedom and democracy

We are seeing a decline in democracy worldwide, if by democracy we mean a political space promoting fundamental freedoms. Western democracy is imitated everywhere in the form of elections, but in terms of human rights it is quite a different story. They are stymied also in the West. However, society cannot generally survive on law alone, and our political models are showing the flaws of Western liberalism.

Politics is much more than a matter of state and government. For Hannah Arendt, it is “sharing of words and deeds”. We need a common awareness, a common cultural cement, to some extent, for populations to come together and collaborate on projects. In his criticism of John Rawls' very procedural revisit of the Rousseauist social contract, Paul Ricoeur points out that institutions with no *affectio societatis* are built on sand.

In the ancient world, concern to govern well was a divine affair, rooted in the Greek, Persian and Roman ideals. Then slaves were excluded from the city under Athenian democracy. The democracy of the Enlightenment was based on Renaissance humanism and on civic and social struggles and heralded a new era of representative democracy. “We are nothing, let us be everything” said Sieyès in the name of the Third Estate. But today's governments, chosen by election, find it extremely difficult to assume their historic mission, that of aggregating different interests around common goals. Legitimacy and effectiveness are also called constantly into question.

Excessive delegation and the participation challenge

The current French political crisis is not only governmental in nature, it strikes all the foundations of our Republic. Simon Kuiper, an FT journalist who has lived in France for twenty years, describes it as an elected monarchy¹⁷. The President leads a powerful, self-replicating technocracy. The regime's philosophy resembles a Confucianism, bringing its rule down to every village

through a nightmarish bureaucracy. The administration has become a service of the state rather than of the people (this reminds me of what happened in the Soviet Union, which did not use the term public service, but service to the state). How wonderful that Pierre Bourdieu, our best critic and analyst of state nobility, sent all three of his sons to the elitist *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, which he too attended (but in fact we have good reason to complain about the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*). The working classes suffer from lack of recognition, the contempt with which they are treated by the ruling elites is no longer tolerated.

Meanwhile, civil society organisations have become weaker, through their own fault, having been content to hide behind the spirit and exercise of counter-power and to defend “social issues”. The people are facing the President, and neither side is prepared to compromise. Parliament must now also contend with massive radicalism and can no longer play its role as legislator. The term “participatory democracy” has been sullied. Major debates and citizens' conventions appear only as crutches, used by central government in an attempt to re-legitimise itself, and failing dismally.

Individuation is coupled with the information revolution: people have access to multiple sources and no longer submit readily to delegation of power. On the other hand, taking responsibility for accountable and supportive participation is quite another matter. A democracy based on participation is not possible without a cultural and institutional revolution. We need more duties than rights (it is at the bottom of the ladder that we lack the latter). A reform of the state and its constitution would break down centralism in favour of effective decentralisation, and a renewed civil society should be acting responsibly to design, share and co-manage collective choices.

The pool of political talent and pathways to government positions must be significantly broadened, and the elites in leadership positions rotated. The role of Parliament may then be rehabilitated. For this, I do

not personally believe our political parties capable of self-reform. Their ideologies have become outdated, they are wearing themselves out with sterile and obtuse competition. The majority rule creates a lot of frustration and is contradictory to the objective of mass society participation. A rule of broad-consensus decision-making would be a good thing, violent minorities aside, but it presupposes a solid civic contract built on previously conceived collective choices raising hope and responsibility. The situation is more complex in France, which has long chosen a republican monarchy, than in European countries having developed a culture of codetermination.

Most of the countries in question no longer challenge their membership of the European Union, despite a frequent sentiment of dispossession when it comes to fundamental political decisions. In the 1990s, I chose to address this sentiment by opening up the prospect of Union democratisation with the production of two reports, one for the European Parliament, the other for the French government¹⁸. On seeing that the Maastricht Treaty had divided French society and beyond, and aware that the ensuing Eurozone was too incomplete to be stable, I realised there were in fact two problems and they were intertwined: very weak solidarity between Europeans on the one hand, and the gap between national citizens and the European institutions on the other (despite the creation of the European Parliament). I was appealing to a common awareness and active citizenship, by proposing to build the social and industrial solidarity the Eurozone lacked and to systematically involve citizens and civil societies in the preparation and implementation of Community choices and actions. My proposals included local access to the decision-making process, rights and responsibilities for regions and municipalities, participation in deliberations and consultation on policies, recurrent evaluations of these policies, and information and education about Europe. Brick by brick, these earned me esteem, but far too little in terms of effects. They remain highly topical.

Many European stakeholders and intellectuals have aspired also to a two-tier democracy, involving both the nation state and the European Union. They have focused on the issue of a real EU budget, a major and unfulfilled objective. In fact, we cannot tackle the budget effectively before reaching an agreement on public goods and solidarity, which raises much deeper challenges of identity.

Whether willingly or unwillingly, France has delegated many of its sovereign powers to the Union indiscriminately, with no concern for active and permanent participation within the institutions themselves. Europe was supposed to open the minds of the French and enrich their lives, but has done too little. Blame lies at the feet of not only the state, but also civil societies. The French are libertarians, they delegate their power to their government and then protest.

End and transcending of Western democracy

In his great “History of Europe in the 19th Century”, Benedetto Croce describes the epic and drama of liberalism, as the bearer of an ideal of freedom, with a new concept of humanity and “a broad and clear vision of the road to be built, to a degree never before achieved”.

This road was one of democratic conquests anchored in national territories and of technological progress transposed into the daily lives of industrial societies. But European liberalism has discredited itself in its desire to conquer the world, its exploitation of workers and the devastation caused by wars. Two centuries later, the great changes brought about by globalisation and the digital revolution are shaking the very functions of what our democracy once was: a “humanist” conception of humankind and the territorial basis of the nation state. We are right to speak of the end of Western democracy as it was built in the modern era¹⁹. And these changes have created the need for a new vision of humankind and a geopolitical reshuffle of the world.

These developments can also pose major risks for humanity itself. The cultural and institutional changes underway are not leading, as hoped, to the birth of a new self with a clear awareness of the challenges of a world civilisation.

Digital technology is transforming individuals, but rather than creating a people augmented by the power of informational machines, it is breeding populations of brainwashed and desocialised individuals. To say that people will spontaneously adopt and use these new tools of their own accord to move towards progress is irresponsible. We would be closing our eyes to the collective failure in education and re-education, not to mention intellectual laziness. The very idea of truth is collapsing, and on this I am in full agreement with the liberal thinker Gaspard Koenig²⁰. We are asking a machine with neither philosophic thoughts nor imagination to do our thinking for us, copying and pasting past data into our brains devoid of meaning in terms of creating a more human future.

Steve Jobs believed mobile phones would change people for the better through universal interconnectivity. In the place of richer social relations, we are seeing more solitude as a result of spending time in front of artificial screens, and a new form of remote violence rather than a cultural maturation conducive to affection (not to mention love).

Yet the public authorities appear unaware of the need for a civilisation policy, as desired by Edgar Morin. They content themselves with safeguards for protecting personal freedoms. John Thornhill compares the current regulatory initiatives on artificial intelligence to the holders of red flags positioned alongside tracks where trains pass at high speed. We must address the cultural and educational challenges while simultaneously showing the political will to break the

monopoly on data processing, which is left to large globalised companies. The European political agenda should include policies for taking social and public control of their platforms, establishing obligations for essential services, and making it illegal to commercialise any artificial intelligence not proven to be safe for humans and their environment.

Despite our universal awareness of environmental degradation, we have not arrived at a common understanding of the civilisation issue. On the contrary, national conservative retrenchments are on the rise and ecological political activism is reaching deadlock. Local action is very separate from transnational solidarity for the good of the people. Aggressive struggles against traditional industry are coupled with blind faith in forward-looking solutions of an essentially technological nature. Meanwhile we hear speak of frightening catastrophes, causing introversion in some, inspiring transcendence in others. This reality is echoed in geopolitical tensions, cybercrime (even in outer space) and the high number of war zones worldwide: we are failing to rise to the challenge of otherness.

The West has looked self-critically back at its past and begun to realise the damage caused by its universalism. But it is also, and more generally, defensive, seeking to protect itself from a foreign or hostile outside world caused by differences in cultures and interests. These contradictions can be overcome only by making great ethical advances in terms of showing responsibility for others, as advocated by Emmanuel Levinas, and by making judicious choices to shape the “world order”²¹.

I am not recommending de-globalisation, which would be disastrous. Although materialistic and cynical, globalisation is also a good thing, since many peoples and states have used it as an opportunity to emancipate themselves from old guardianships and some to emerge from misery and poverty. Yet it is very fractured and must be profoundly transformed. However, we remain locked in the shackles of the democratic forms of the nation state. Hope lies in the formation of large regions, as laboratories of cooperation and solidarity. Pascal Lamy also mentioned the prospect of a world-democracy²², but this is not the road currently taken.

Europe in a time of geopolitical choices

The famous Schuman Declaration of 1950 begins with the words: “World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.” Europe has already found itself at the centre of world wars and called itself into question to reactivate the age-old ideal of perpetual peace as described by l’Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Emmanuel Kant, Saint Simon and many others. We must draw inspiration from this, too, to restore our currently diseased European Union.

Europe’s mission

We are constantly invited to join the liberals’ struggle against il-liberalism. Dividing the world into friends and foes like this is an age-old tradition²³, one we should begin to break.

Of course, it is better to live here where the rule of law protects essential freedoms, and wanting to frame the conduct of individual states with a law based on universal values is justified. But we should not hide from the reality of our societies, which are no strangers to servitude and hypocrisy. Moreover, we must not confuse the people with the autocratic regimes of which they are victims, rather we must turn to them to understand them and build bridges. The universalism we should aspire to must not divide but be relevant to all humanity.

The concept of freedom and democracy of the United States of America is not universal, it is that of an economic, financial, military and cultural empire that today wants to preserve its global supremacy. China, a much

older empire in the throes of recent revival, also aspires to supremacy. It is not a paragon of virtue, certainly with respect to human rights, but there is no denying the richness of its people and civilisation. Yet the Chinese are comfortable with globalisation and multilateralism, whereas American leaders are not.

I do not expect the Union to choose sides, but it must reach a decision as to its future shape. “European sovereignty”? A term stolen from the time when nation states began to form, which does not fit well with today’s interdependence and need for solidarity. “Strategic autonomy” would be more appropriate, yet to what end? Europe must become a force, but one that is consistent with its former ideal of peace.

As a friend of both the Americans and the Chinese, while being fully autonomous, Europe should already be taking major initiatives to revive world trade (and cease closing its eyes to the overall priority of its competition rules), promote monetary cooperation (beyond the hegemony of the dollar) and more generally build well-defined mutual interest solidarity. A view I share with Eric Le Boucher²⁴. Europe must connect more with the great mass of peoples in Asia, India, Africa and Latin America, where many want to choose their own destiny, refuse the division of the world into blocs and are beginning to build their own regional cooperation synergies, in which we should be involved. There is an imminent and terrible risk of debt crisis in the countries of the south. China has invested more in them than all the Western countries combined. It is starting to write off debts, while the US is slamming on the brakes and the IMF is powerless.

Many of these countries have dollar-denominated debt overhangs, which add enormously to their debt burdens while their domestic currencies fall rapidly in value.

Once more, the leaders of our democracies believe that preparing for war is the right way to avoid it and are over-arming, in a remake of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*. They appear blind to the exorbitant cost of re-arming with new technologies and the resulting pressure to share it between states, in other words the budgetary and fiscal burden on populations. I agree with those who say "we are sleepwalking into war", in reference to the title of a famous book about the summer of 1914²⁵. We need to recover the spirit and will for mass demonstrations for peace.

In 1939-1940, Heidegger questioned the *koinon* (the common) of the various existing regimes (liberalism, communism, nazism, fascism) and saw in it the thirst for power, pushed to the point of world conquest²⁶. What do we have to gain from the rivalry between the US and China for world supremacy? What do we think of America's track record in foreign policy in recent decades (Vietnam, Iraq, etc.)? What geopolitical decisions should Europe be making: lock itself into an Atlantic Alliance, build an autonomous power, or become a bridge connecting all world regions? The European Union has neither the means nor the will to become a real power. And for what purpose? The only ethically just solution would be to become a bridge promoting the reconciliation of nations. For Gandhi, non-violence was a Truth Force²⁷.

War and peace

The United States of America played a major role in the formation of the European Community, no two ways about it. Without the foresight of its leaders at the time, the French and Germans would not have reached an agreement. De Gaulle was right to want this community to be autonomous, however his concept of a Europe of nations was not suitable, a supranational dimension was needed. But that was yesterday. Our dependence on the United States has increased in all areas and we are strengthening NATO, despite once being considered clinically dead.

Putin's aggression against Ukraine is a devastating folly being met with heroic resistance by Ukrainians, with the support of the West. Ukraine is rising as a nation in its own right and it will count. However, war was not inevitable, as Sylvie Bermann²⁸ and Mary Elise Sarotte²⁹ have shown. Buoyed by its triumph after the fall of the USSR, the West closed its eyes to the upheaval this caused for the Russians and globally.

The Russian people must be dissociated from their regime, despite the apparent support of the vast majority of its population. A thick fog prevents us from appreciating the invaluable resources of this people. Blinded by our ignorance, we are encouraged to forget its geniuses' contributions to our civilisation. The Ukrainians are right to say the Stalinism trial did not take place in Russia,

although Solzhenitsyn and others have already accomplished much. But you must read Svetlana Alexievitch, under little suspicion of being a Putinist, to learn about the Russian people from the inside³⁰. She explains their life in a country enamoured by a utopian struggle for freedom, which turned out to be deadly. They learned to die, to devote themselves to sacrifice. "The 'Red Empire' is gone, but the 'Red Man' [...] remains. He endures." And it is his suffering that interests the writer. Why did his sacrifice not transform into freedom? It is a black hole. Humiliated, stripped bare, "he is aggressive and dangerous". She concludes: "I have three homes: my Belarusian land, the homeland of my father, where I have lived my whole life; Ukraine, the homeland of my mother, where I was born; and Russia's great culture, without which I cannot imagine myself. All are very dear to me. But in this day and age it is difficult to talk about love."

Simone Weil wrote: "It is not the cause for which men took up arms that makes a victory more just or less, it is the order that is established when arms have been laid down." As for the war in Ukraine, Europe will probably be the clear loser, more than any other region of the world. It is possible that after ceasefire a more or less frozen conflict will settle on our doorstep, like a long-term cancer. There can be no intra-European security without an agreement with Russia. And it would be a mistake to believe that the Russian government will pay the estimated 500 billion dollars needed to rebuild Ukraine. We must not repeat with Russia the mistakes made in the 1918 Treaty of Versailles with Germany out of a spirit of revenge. Russia is in Europe, and instead of making it a pariah, we should be preparing for long-term cooperation, as Keynes had hoped in vain for both Germany and the nascent Soviet Union.

Moreover, we must not reinvent a cold war by dividing the world into blocs, as was the case with the US and the USSR. It would not be cold but abominably hot, and we need to consider the role of an emerging and powerful plural South. This is not its fight. The majority of states, representing the world's population, have not taken sides in the conflict in Ukraine. Alliances are reforming in the Middle East against US domination, and the African resentments towards Europe and France are not cyclical in nature. All these countries are observing the hypocrisy of the West.

To support Ukraine in its struggle is right, to follow its leaders when they call on Europe to declare itself co-belligerent against Russia is wrong. Ukraine will join the European Union. When it does, the countries of the Western Balkans should not be left out. Constantin Sigov, a leading Ukrainian intellectual, sees Ukraine's accession to the EU as an opportunity to revive Europe³¹. He leans towards the great thinkers and doers of our past, such as Patocka, Milosz and Bibo. I read them voraciously at the time of the big enlargement in the 2000s and saw also in them a means to revitalise the European conscience. But I was disappointed, as too were Kundera³², Giermek, Zanussi and many others, struck by the decline of

European humanism. Sigov hopes that Poland and the Baltic States will join forces with Ukraine to guide a revival of the European Union. But should the Union exhaust itself in internal power struggles? Is it not more urgent that its members converge, in plurality, to build their common goods together and reform their institutions? It is of course normal for Ukraine to want a debate to increase awareness of the historical truth and current issues, and it is up to us to prepare for it. Apparently, France currently thinks this irrelevant.

Uniting Europeans

The idea of a European political community was embodied in federalism. For a long time, there was talk of forming a “United States of Europe”. But trying to emulate the US would get us nowhere. The US gave birth to a nation. Europe’s nations have histories, they are not ready to relinquish their distinctive features or sovereignties. Jean Monnet best summed up the purpose of our project when he said: “We are not making a coalition of states, but uniting people”. He achieved this by first bringing them together, building concrete solidarity on essential goods. This has become all the more urgent today. We must not abandon the idea of a Federation, but without repeating an attempt at a Constitution, since little or nothing has been done to link peoples together. And we must not be driven by a desire to develop some kind of third great power. Here too, the way forward is for populations, civil societies and nations to learn to cooperate and clarify their aims.

Once again, we must ask ourselves if the objective of a political union is justified. What kind of fraternity for what kind of solidarity within Europe and with other parts of the world? What governance model should we adopt to bridge the growing gulf between the central institutions of the Union and the populations of member countries? In the Council, each state defends its own interest. The European Parliament is built on coalitions of struggling national parties, and the competitive doxa is a common divider.

In the previous section I outlined how to build democracy at EU level and proposed we start with the basics: culture and education, guiding them towards higher principles of ethics and reason. I insisted on sharing the challenge of common goods, crucial for another mode of development; training, health, agriculture, energy, information, money and finance must all be qualified as public goods. In all these areas, volunteer states could take the initiative by launching cross-border cooperation, unimpeded by the vetoes of others. And we must reform the central institutions to synergise these initiatives and recreate unity. The European Parliament would be largely made up of trans-European movements and parties. The Commission, which is currently an administration geared towards law and expertise, would be headed by a political College composed of a small number of ministers in the above fields. Candidates

would campaign in the EP elections and selection would follow. An investment and solidarity budget would be built and the Union’s economic and social policies would be debated and evaluated publicly each year, a proposal I made to the European Parliament in 1996.

When reduced to merely an institution, the Union loses public support and dries up. Common awareness can be fostered only through a process of personal and collective acculturation, and by sharing experiences on the ground. Europe must open up to the world and stop relying on the projection of its model and own interests. The challenge of otherness will prove crucial for a new universalism: people from other civilisations have much to give and would like us to treat them as equals³³. By regenerating our cultural foundations, we would be making our humble contribution to the birth of a world civilisation: ample justification for a European project.

Philippe Herzog
April 15, 2023

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² Lucien Febvre, *L'Europe, Genèse d'une civilisation*, Perrin, 1999.

³ Rémi Brague, *Europe, la voie romaine*, Criterion, 1992.

⁴ Dominique Lecourt, *Philosophie des Sciences*, PUF, *Que Sais-Je*, 2001.

⁵ Stéphane Mosès, *L'Ange de l'histoire*. Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem, Gallimard, 2006.

⁶ Aldo Schiavone, *L'histoire brisée. La Rome antique et l'Occident moderne*, Belin, 2009.

⁷ Monique Castillo, *Faire renaissance. Une éthique publique pour demain*, Vrin 2016.

⁸ François Jullien, *Ressources du christianisme mais sans y entrer par la foi*, L'Herne, 2018.

⁹ Carlos Saura, *The Walls Can Talk*, documentary film, 2022.

¹⁰ David Landes, *Richesse et pauvreté des nations*, Albin Michel, 2000.

¹¹ Karl Polanyi, *La grande transformation. Aux origines politiques et économiques de notre temps [The Great transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time]*, Gallimard, 1983.

¹² Jacques de Larosière, *En finir avec le risque de l'illusion financière*, Odile Jacob, 2022.

¹³ John Thornhill, *SVB shows that there are few libertarians in a financial foxhole*, *Financial Times*, 14 March 23.

¹⁴ Philippe Herzog, *L'Europe doit ôter sa tunique de Nessus, pour un capitalisme responsable [Europe must take off its shirt of Nessus]*, *Cahiers d'Europe* 21, ASCPE, March 2021.

¹⁵ Claude Fischer-Herzog, *Grammar for a coherent energy transition in Europe in La Lettre des Entretiens Européens - September 2022*.

¹⁶ *This was the subject of the first chapter of my Memoirs. D'une révolution à l'autre*, Editions du Rocher, 2018.

¹⁷ Simon Kuiper, *Beyond the barricades*, *Financial Times*, 25-26 March 2023.

¹⁸ Philippe Herzog, *Manifeste pour une démocratie européenne*, Editions de l'Atelier, 2000.

¹⁹ Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *La fin de la démocratie*, Flammarion, 1993; Philippe Delmas, *Un pouvoir implacable et doux*, Fayard, 2019; Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *La fin de la démocratie : apogée et déclin d'une civilisation*, LLL, 2019.

²⁰ Gaspard Koenig, *Faut-il avoir peur de l'IA ?*, *Les Echos*, 5 April 2023.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Poche, 1987.

²² Pascal Lamy, *La démocratie-monde pour une autre gouvernance globale*, Poche, 2014.

²³ Carl Schmitt, *La notion de politique (1932)*, Calman Lévy, 1994.

²⁴ Eric Le Boucher, *Comment faire avec la Chine de Xi Jinping*, *Les Echos*, 7 April 2023.

²⁵ Christopher Clark, *Les somnambules. Été 1914 : comment l'Europe a marché vers la guerre*, Flammarion 2013.

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²⁷ Erik Eriksson, *La vérité de Gandhi*, Flammarion, 1992.

²⁸ Sylvie Bermann, *Madame l'Ambassadeur : de Pékin à Moscou, une vie de diplomate*, Tallandier, 2022.

²⁹ Marie-Elise Sarotte, *The making of Post-Cold War Stalemate, FT, The Road to war, 26 February 2022*.

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³¹ Constantin Sigov, *Le courage de l'Ukraine*, Cerf, 2023; and Laure Mandeville, *Quand l'Ukraine se lève*, Talent, 2022.

³² Milan Kundera, *Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale*, Le Débat, Gallimard, 2021.

³³ The ASCPE “Open World, Regards croisés” film society that I co-host with Claude Fischer-Herzog is making a modest and beautiful contribution.