

Is “Old Europe” Doomed?

by Theodore Dalrymple



The late Professor Joad, a popularizer of philosophy rather than a philosopher in the true sense, used to preface his answer to any question by saying, “It depends on what you mean by...”—in this case, “doomed.”

The word “doomed” implies an ineluctable destiny, against which, presumably, it is vain for men to struggle. And this in turn implies a whole, contestable philosophy of history.

Historical determinism has two sources: first the apparent ability of historians, who of course have the benefit of hindsight, to explain any and all historical events with a fair degree of plausibility, even if their explanations of the same events differ widely, thus giving rise to the impression that if the past was determined, the future must be determined also; and second the tendency of people to assume that current statistical or social trends will continue, or in other words

that projections are the same as predictions. One has only to consider the exponential growth of a bacterium on a Petri dish, which if continued would mean that the entire biosphere would soon consist solely of that organism, to realize that projections do not necessarily give rise to accurate predictions.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that a pall of doom does currently overhang Europe. In retrospect, the Twentieth Century may be considered Europe's melancholy, long withdrawing roar (to adapt Matthew Arnold's description of the decline of religion). And just as, according to Disraeli, the Continent of Europe would not long suffer Great Britain to be the workshop of the world, so the world would not, and did not, long suffer the Continent of Europe to dominate it, economically, culturally and intellectually. Europe's loss of power, influence and importance continues to this day; and however much one's material circumstances may have improved (just take a look at photographs of daily life in France or Britain in the 1950s and compare them to daily life there today), it is always unpleasant, and creates a sense of deep existential unease, to live in a country perpetually in decline, even if that decline is merely relative.

Combined with this is the fact that most European populations experience a profound feeling of impotence in the face of their own immovable political elites. (My wife, who was born in Paris 56 years ago, cannot remember any period of her life from adolescence onward when M. Chirac was not a prominent figure in French public life, and had he not died after a mere fifty years at or near the top of the greasy pole, the same might have been said of M. Mitterand.) This feeling of impotence is not because of any lack of intelligence or astuteness on the part of the populations in question: if you wanted to know why there was so much youth unemployment in France, you would not ask the Prime Minister, M. Dominique de Villepin, but the vastly more honest and clear-headed village

plumber or carpenter, who would give you many precise and convincing reasons why no employer in his right mind would readily take on a new and previously untried young employee. Indeed, it would take a certain kind of intelligence, available only to those who have undergone a lot of formal education, not to be able to work it out.

The principal motor of Europe's current decline is, in my view, its obsession with social security, which has created rigid social and economic systems that are extremely resistant to change. And this obsession with social security is in turn connected with a fear of the future: for the future has now brought Europe catastrophe and relative decline for more than a century.

What exactly is it that Europeans fear, given that their decline has been accompanied by an unprecedented increase in absolute material well-being? An open economy holds out more threat to them than promise: they believe that the outside world will bring them not trade and wealth, but unemployment and a loss of comfort. They therefore are inclined to retire into their shell and succumb to protectionist temptation, both internally with regard to the job market, and externally with regard to other nations. And the more those other nations advance relative to themselves, the more necessary does protection seem to them. A vicious circle is thus set up.

In the process of course, the state is either granted or arrogates to itself (or, of course, both) ever-greater powers. A bureaucratic monster is created that takes on a life of its own, that is not only uneconomic but anti-economic, and that can be reformed only at the cost of social unrest that politicians naturally wish to avoid. Inertia intermittently punctuated by explosion is therefore the most likely outcome.

Hundreds of thousands of young Frenchmen, despairing of finding a job at home where about a quarter of people in their twenties are unemployed, have crossed the Channel to take

advantage of Britain's relatively flexible labor market: which, however, the British government is in the process of destroying by means of ever-closer regulation in the French centralist style.

Since coming to power, the current British government has increased public expenditure enormously, such that the British tax burden now exceeds that of Germany, which itself is a very heavily taxed economy. The ostensible purpose of this expenditure has been to improve public services while serving the cause of social justice, a rhetoric that the public has hitherto believed; the hidden purpose, or at least effect, has been to create administrative jobs on an unprecedented scale, whose principle function consists of obstruction of other people as they try to create wealth, and to bring into being a political clientele dependent upon government 'largesse' (half the British population is now in receipt of government subventions as part or the whole of their incomes). Not only will this lead to economic disaster, but it naturally results in the psychology succinctly described by Hilaire Belloc in the moral of his cautionary tale about Albert who was eaten by a lion at the zoo when he strayed from the nurse who took him there:

And always keep a-hold of nurse

For fear of finding something worse.

The dependent population does not like the state and its agents, indeed they hate them, but they soon come to fear the elimination of their good offices even more. They are like drug addicts who know that the drug that they take is not good for them, and hate the drug dealer from whom they obtain their drug, but cannot face the supposed pains of withdrawal. And what is true of Britain is true, with a few exceptions, everywhere else in Europe.

In the name of social justice, personal and sectional interest

has become all-powerful, paralyzing all attempts to maximize collective endeavor. Nowhere is this clearer than in France, where a survey published in the left-wing newspaper, *Liberation*, showed that three times as many people had warm feelings towards socialism as towards capitalism. (The ambition of three quarters of French youth is to be employed by the state). Yet French defense of personal and sectional interest is so ferocious that it renders reform almost impossible, at least without violence on the streets. Workers in the French public transport system, who enjoy privileges that would have made Louis XIV gasp, strike the moment that any reduction in them is even mooted, all in the name of preserving social justice as represented by those privileges, despite the fact that striking brings misery and impoverishment to millions of their fellow-citizens, and their privileges are bankrupting the state. The goal of everyone is to parasitize everyone else, or to struggle for as large a slice of the economic cake as possible. No one worries about the size of the cake itself. *Après moi, le deluge* has become the watchword not of the king alone, but of the entire population.

France is perhaps worse in this respect than most other European countries, but it is not in an entirely different class or category from them. It hardly needs pointing out that the rest of an increasingly competitive and globalized world is not going to be sensitive to the same concerns as European governments; and while it is possible that European countries will nevertheless survive or pay their way economically by finding niche markets, this would represent a marginalization of a continent accustomed to thinking of itself as the centre of the world. Of course, marginalization is not the same as doom, unless you believe that being important in the world is itself all-important.

But there are other threats to Europe. The miserabilist view of the European past, in which achievement on a truly stupendous scale is disregarded in favor of massacre,

oppression and injustice, deprives the population of any sense of pride or tradition to which it might contribute or which might be worth preserving. This loss of cultural confidence is particularly important at a time of mass immigration from very alien cultures, an immigration that can be successfully negotiated (as it has been in the past, or in the United States up to the era of multiculturalism) only if the host nations believe themselves to be the bearers of cultures into which immigrants wish, or ought to wish, to integrate, assimilate, and make their own.

In the absence of any such belief, there is a risk that the only way in which people inhabiting a country will have anything in common is geographical; and civil conflict is the method in which they will resolve their very different and entrenched conceptions about the way life should be lived. This is particularly true when immigrants are in possession, as they believe, of a unique and universal truth, such as Islam in its various forms often claims to be. If the host nation is so lacking in cultural confidence that it does not even make familiarity with the national language a condition of citizenship (as has been until recently the case in Great Britain), it is hardly surprising that integration does not proceed very far.

The problem is multiplied when a rigid labor market is capable of creating large castes of people who are unemployed and might well remain so for the whole of their adult lives. To the bitterness caused by economic uselessness will then be added, or rather be multiplied by, the bitterness of cultural separation. In the case of Islam this is particularly dangerous, because the mixture of an awareness of inferiority on the one hand, and superiority on the other, is historically a very combustible one. Latin Americans have felt it towards the United States, Russians towards Western Europe, Chinese and Japanese towards Europe and America, no doubt among many other examples.

Doom or further decline is not inevitable, however, though avoidance of it requires active effort. The auguries are not good, not only because of the political immobilism that elaborate systems of social security have caused in most European countries, but because of the European multinational entity that is being created against the wishes of the peoples of Europe (insofar as they can be gauged).

The European Union serves several purposes, none of which have much to do with the real challenges facing the continent. The Union helps Germans to forget that they are Germans, and gives them another identity rather more pleasing in their own estimation; it allows the French to forget that they are now a medium sized nation, one among many, and gives them the illusion of power and importance; it acts as a giant pension fund for politicians who are no longer willing or able successfully to compete in the rough and tumble of electoral politics, and enables them to hang on to influence and power long after they have been rejected at the polls; and it acts as a potential fortress against the winds of competition that are now blowing from all over the world, and that are deeply unsettling to people who desire security above all else.

Apocalyptic thought is curiously pleasurable. Doom is too strong a word, in my view; I think it would be more accurate to say that Europe is sleepwalking to further relative decline. But we should also modestly remember that the future is, ultimately, unknowable.

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