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INTRODUCTION

The European Puzzle



FIGURE 1. Las Ramblas, Barcelona, Spain. Jan Kranendonk, Shutterstock.

On September 26, 2017, the French president Emmanuel Macron laid out a compelling vision for the European future. Speaking to students at the Sorbonne, he reaffirmed the promise of Europe as an idea of “peace, prosperity and freedom,” claiming “it is our responsibility to bring it to life.” Proposing a long list of reforms to strengthen “European sovereignty,” he called for cooperation in security and defense; a common approach to migration; greater coordination in foreign policy; a

joint effort to manage the ecological transition; more support for digital innovation; and finally, increased economic competitiveness. To implement such an ambitious agenda, he insisted on “a stronger budget within Europe,” public debate in “democratic conventions” and a new Franco-German partnership as an engine of European progress.¹ While many Europhiles were inspired by Macron’s lofty rhetoric, more pragmatic leaders like the German chancellor Angela Merkel worried about how to achieve these bold goals in actual practice.

In contrast to such enthusiasm, Euroskeptics consider the very concept of Europe “a dirty word.” Western European populists like Marine Le Pen of France blame Brussels for all the problems of globalization and immigration. Similarly, the Eastern European authoritarians like the Hungarian president Viktor Orbán or the Polish Law and Justice Party miss no opportunity to disparage the EU, although they are dependent on its subsidies. The British prime minister Boris Johnson and his Brexiteer supporters loathed the supranational aspirations of the Continent so much that they actually left the EU on January 1, 2021.² In the United States, many Republicans “do not want to become more like Europe” and fuel a visceral fear of socialism so as to defend American exceptionalism. Ex-president Donald Trump’s call to “make America great again” was also predicated on seeing the European Union as the enemy who had cheated the United States in trade and freeloaded to secure its defense.³ In the rightist discourse, Europe has become a symbol for everything it detests.

Journalistic appraisals and scholarly analyses have similarly swung from enthusiastic support for the European project to severe criticism. The initially optimistic assessments of the European Union as a promising model for dealing with the challenges of globalization seem curiously antiquated due to the more recent problems that have threatened to break the EU apart.⁴ Supported by the conservative media like the Murdoch press, an entire gloom-and-doom literature has instead been predicting the impending collapse of Europe—even if that has refused to happen so far.⁵ Such alarmist analyses exaggerate the very real challenges of currency coherence, migration pressure, or British withdrawal in order to paint a discouraging picture of a “fractured continent” that

is incapable of solving its existential problems. This largely negative portrayal has created a self-fulfilling prophecy, making the historian Timothy Garton Ash wonder: “Is Europe disintegrating?”⁶

The privilege of living in both Europe and the United States has provoked me to question such clichéd accounts of Continental decline with more accurate information and interpretation. Born during World War II, I grew up in postwar Germany, reared by my mother since my father had died in Russia. In order to understand the world better, I went to the United States as a foreign student, earning a BA in American studies at the University of Wyoming and a PhD in comparative history at the University of Wisconsin. Writing and teaching on both sides of the Atlantic, I have tried to explain the travails of the German past to Americans while explicating the convolutions of US politics to Europeans.⁷ This double perspective has given me the inside knowledge of and distance to European affairs that informed my synthesis *Out of Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century*.⁸ By following that work with a reflection on the European experience since 1990, I want to discuss which of its aspects constitute a “European way of life” as shown by the Las Ramblas boulevard in Barcelona. By addressing current problems, such a reflection aims to stimulate a transatlantic dialogue about progressive solutions.

The European Model

This European model is a form of democratic modernity, produced by painful learning from the bloody catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century. During the stalemate of World War I, three different visions emerged that battled for supremacy on the Continent: In Russia, Vladimir Lenin propagated a radical form of socialism in the revolution by promising an egalitarian life in the Soviet Union. From the United States, President Woodrow Wilson promoted peace and prosperity through a benign form of liberal democracy. And in Central Europe, nationalist resentments inspired Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler to develop a Fascism and National Socialism that claimed to create a people’s community. In the bitter contest between these ideological

blueprints, democracy finally emerged victorious since the United States twice rescued the Continent from itself. But during the last decades of the twentieth century, the Europeans have begun to emancipate themselves from American tutelage, developing shared Western values in their own version of self-government that can serve as an example even for the United States.⁹

A first positive trait of the European model is the existence of a truly democratic election system that seeks to encourage more citizen involvement. In contrast to the vote suppression, rural overrepresentation, and flagrant gerrymandering of the American and to a degree British “winner takes all” process, proportional representation more accurately reflects the wishes of the electorate by counting all ballots equally, even those of the smaller parties. To prevent fragmentation, it sometimes includes a hurdle for parliamentary representation, which is set at 5 percent in Germany. Unlike the money-driven US campaigns, European parties are more often supported by public funds. Since this system reflects minority views, it leads to higher participation during elections. The broader range of voices in Parliament favors coalition governments, which tend toward compromise, resulting in centrist policies. Weighing each vote more fairly than the Electoral College, proportional voting, also used in the European Parliament, makes for better government in the long run.¹⁰

A second exemplary aspect is the generally peaceful international behavior of a Europe that has learned the lessons of two incredibly bloody wars. While individual countries still cling to national sovereignty, their cooperation in the EU is an attempt to avoid the repetition of earlier bloodshed. Though often disagreeing on foreign or security issues, Brussels speaks with a more united voice in matters of global trade, favoring a balance between free exchanges and protection of its own market. The European member states are heavily involved in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), supporting the liberal world order that emerged after World War II. While participating in some military interventions sponsored by the United Nations (UN) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), they prefer to resolve problems by negotiation whenever

possible. With the exception of the wars of Yugoslav succession, this civilian approach has pacified Europe and helped reduce tensions in other crisis regions, even if it had occasionally to be supplemented by force.¹¹

A third worthwhile characteristic of the European model is the welfare state, which creates a sense of security and solidarity. Since neoliberals in the UK have prevented a Europeanization of social policy, it has largely remained a preserve of the EU member states. The provision of social benefits that had expanded greatly during the postwar boom ceased to grow further during the stagflation and deindustrialization following the oil shocks of the 1970s. Instead, the return to a market ideology fostered by a middle-class tax revolt led to a considerable retrenchment in government services. But far from collapsing, the welfare state has been reformed, moving from subsidizing wage replacements for client groups to enabling recipients to reenter the job market through additional training and childcare.¹² Though strained by feminist demands for equality, migration pressures, and aging populations, support for government social policy has continued, absorbing almost half of the budget of most European states.

Taken together, these traits of the European model constitute a progressive alternative because they provide a better quality of life for most citizens than the vaunted “American dream.” In truth, the latter offers perhaps a higher income, bigger houses, grander SUVs—but these are purchased by job insecurity, social inequality, racist violence, and a rampant pandemic. People who have lived in Europe prize its social safety net, such as “access for all to child care, medical and parental leave from work, tuition free college, a living stipend, universal health care and generous pensions.” Other attractive features are longer vacations, public transit, support for culture, gun safety, and secure employment, just to cite a few examples. Such benefits unquestionably do require paying higher taxes. But they also provide greater services that make life more agreeable for the average citizen. Even if they would have to develop their own version, many Americans might enjoy these advantages as well. In a recent Social Progress Index, the United States has therefore dropped down to number twenty-eight in the world—a scandalous decline.¹³

The Present as History

This reflection draws on theoretical discussions of a “history of the present” that go beyond journalistic snapshots by putting current events into a longer time frame.¹⁴ Looking for bearings in a rapidly changing world is difficult since the outcome of developments is not yet known and the archival record remains inaccessible. Nonetheless, a systematic review of public debates about a series of major issues like migration can provide a more stable perspective that differentiates short-range panics from longer structural trends. The source base for such an analysis consists of speeches and interviews by political actors as well as commentary in the leading media, ranging from the *Economist* to *Die Zeit*. Moreover, statistical data from Eurostat and survey results from various pollsters provide a way to distinguish rhetorical claims from actual facts. Finally, personal statements of ordinary people offer a window on the impact of policy decisions on their changing everyday lives.

In order to address the transatlantic crisis of liberal democracy, this book explores a series of thematic and national case studies, proceeding in four chronological steps.¹⁵ Part I begins in Sopron, Hungary, with the lifting of the Iron Curtain in 1989, which triggered the mass exodus from East Germany that toppled the Berlin Wall and provided the Continent with a chance to become “whole and free” again.¹⁶ Chapter 2 then moves to a shopping center in the Polish city of Poznań to discuss the difficulties and successes of the neoliberal transformation of Eastern European economies and societies.¹⁷ Chapter 3 goes on to the Luxembourg border town of Schengen to reflect on the progress of European integration due to the opening of borders, the introduction of a shared currency, and the expansion of the European Union to the east.¹⁸ In the euphoria of the Communist overthrow, European integration seemed to offer an attractive blueprint for peace and prosperity to be emulated elsewhere.¹⁹

Part II aims to explain the reasons for the unexpected avalanche of problems during the past decade, which often appeared to prove the Euroskeptics right. As the epicenter of the sovereign debt crisis, the Greek capital of Athens serves as a starting point for a discussion of

the advantages and liabilities of the euro as a single currency.²⁰ Chapter 5 then visits Italian beaches like those on the island of Lampedusa to discuss the desperate mass migration from Africa and Syria that is stoking populist fears all over Europe of terrorism by angry Muslim youths.²¹ Chapter 6 moves to London to explore the shocking outcome of the Brexit referendum that has catapulted the UK out of the EU in spite of its shared business interests and historical ties to the Continent.²² Due to these unforeseen crises, an entire pessimistic literature now flatly asserts that “the end of Europe” has come.²³

Part III contradicts these predictions of failure by presenting examples of the continued viability of the European model. Starting with Volkswagen’s car production plant in Wolfsburg, chapter 7 analyzes the adjustment of the German economy to global competition by specializing in medium-high technology such as luxury automobiles.²⁴ Chapter 8 then moves to the village of Högfors to explore the Swedish attempts to restructure the welfare state into an “enabling” mode that makes workers fit for a high-tech economy.²⁵ Chapter 9 describes a wind power park close to the island of Anholt to demonstrate the Danish effort to become independent of fossil fuels in response to global warming.²⁶ These examples show that Europe functions quite well in daily life, even if the project of transforming the EU into “an ever closer union” still needs, according to the French president Emmanuel Macron, a new European initiative so as to revitalize its trajectory.²⁷

Part IV addresses the shared transatlantic challenges of liberal democracy, affecting both Europe and the United States. It begins with a look at the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in order to discuss problems of European military defense in a post–Cold War era.²⁸ Chapter 11 then goes on to Paris to explore the French “yellow vest” movement as an example of grassroots populism, which is challenging cosmopolitan elites by rejecting further integration of the EU and by demanding protection against the effects of globalization.²⁹ The final chapter moves to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, to reconsider how the global role of Europe during the last several decades made it drift away from the United States in its interests as well as its values.³⁰ It concludes by arguing that, in order to resolve

issues like defense and democratic governance, Europeans and Americans still have much to learn from each other.

Such a multifaceted approach is necessary in order to address the complexity of “unity in diversity” that characterizes contemporary life on the Continent.³¹ As a geographical expression “Europe” is merely a protrusion of the Asian landmass with a paradoxical blend of nation-states and supranational institutions. Neither Russia nor the United States quite belong to it, though they have a major impact on it. The UK is itself not sure whether it is a part, being both inside and outside at the same time. The European Union has largely managed to unite the Continent, with the exception of Norway, Switzerland, and some of the Balkan states. But Europe itself is also divided into major regions like Scandinavia, the West-Central core, the Mediterranean area, and the post-Communist realm. Since the journalistic and political usage varies between the EU as institution and the entire Continent, this reflection explores their dialectic of diversity and unity. Focusing on some of the best practices, it treats Europe as a projection screen for a whole range of aspirations and behaviors that constitute the references to it.

European Lessons

It is the thesis of this book that the European experience during the past three decades provides an instructive guide to the possibilities and problems of progressive politics in the twenty-first century.³² The failure of Soviet-style Marxism has left an ideological void that populists have rushed to fill with their dangerous nationalist and racist hatred, which appeals to many people who feel threatened by the changes of globalization. Where it works, the European model of liberal democracy, peaceful multilateralism, and social welfare provides a constructive alternative that offers freedom, peace, and solidarity. Achieving these values is far from inevitable as the crises of mass migration, sovereign debt, and nationalist egotism have shown. But positive experiences in competitiveness, welfare reform, or environmental protection also suggest that many Europeans have already begun to realize the gains of their

cooperation.³³ These successful examples offer hope for a renewal of progressive politics in general.

On the one hand, Europeans themselves must redouble their efforts to live up to the standards of their own model to counter the pressures of globalized competition. The negative stereotypes of the “Brussels bureaucracy,” purveyed even by leftist media, have undercut much of the prior progress of integration. Moreover, a populist group of illiberal democrats like the Hungarian Viktor Orbán is eroding human rights and opposing common solutions to vital questions like migration. Though recognizing the economic clout of the EU, foreign leaders often ridicule its diplomatic and military weakness. Concerned intellectuals like the political scientist Ulrike Guerot, the writer Robert Menasse, and the theater impresario Milo Rau have therefore issued a manifesto for a “European Republic” to be founded by citizens from below: “It is time to turn the promise inherent in Europe into a reality” by transcending the nation-state so that “a common market and a common currency can be created within a common European democracy.”³⁴

On the other hand, those Americans who are searching for a reasonable alternative to Trumpist populism also ought to take a fresh look at “Europe’s promise.”³⁵ While both sides share fundamental values—such as human rights, democracy, and capitalism—their implementation is increasingly diverging.³⁶ In contrast to the United States’ frequent resort to military force, most Europeans believe in peaceful diplomacy and multilateralism. Unlike the neoliberal American faith in unbridled competition, Europe prefers to curb financial speculation so as to avoid periodic crashes. While the gap between rich and poor is widening in market-oriented America, this discrepancy is limited by the social solidarity of a generous welfare state on the Continent. While Washington has rejoined the Paris climate agreement, Brussels insists on environmental protection and shifts to renewable energies. Why do Europeans live more secure and satisfying lives according to a whole spate of criteria, ranging from health care to gun control?³⁷

Both Continental skeptics and American critics need to remember the catastrophes of the twentieth century in order to make sure that

such disasters will not recur in the future.³⁸ The populist temptation of resorting to simple solutions, repressing dissent, and attacking foreign enemies has had terrible results in the fascist and Communist dictatorships. Their ideological efforts at social engineering have proven deadly to millions of race or class victims who were excluded from the community or unwilling to go along. Moreover, the launching of nationalist wars of annihilation has claimed an immense number of lives, devastating even the victorious countries. American victories in the world wars have tended to stifle self-criticism through military success, while Europeans have been forced to learn the bitter lessons of such dangers at tremendous human costs. Fortunately, the inauguration of Joseph Biden as American president in 2021 offers an opportunity to engage in a renewed transatlantic dialogue about progressive solutions.³⁹

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