

Europe and the New World Disorder

Europe, Jean-Paul-Sartre wrote in 1961, “is springing leaks everywhere. What then has happened? It is simply that in the past we made history and now it is being made of us.” Writing in the late 1940s, the Mexican poet and thinker Octavio Paz was even harsher: “Europe, once a storehouse of ready-to-use ideas, now lives as we do, from day to day. Strictly speaking, the modern world no longer possesses any ideas.”

These descriptions of Europe’s intellectual exhaustion in the mid-20th century should be seen in the context of two world wars. Europe had produced the surplus of world history during the centuries when the patterns, values and criteria developed within European culture were exported across the world---what Paul Valery called the ‘Europeanization’ of the world. Europe’s military and economic domination was accompanied by its cultural and intellectual supremacy, and an extraordinary confidence in the universality of its experience. Large abstract ideas of progress and history, political institutions like the nation-state, aesthetic forms such as the Novel, ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism and socialism, and processes such as industrial capitalism became the reference points for the evaluation of any other form of human life, past and present.

The French Revolution had created what Jacob Burckhardt called "optimistic will" - the belief in progress, reason, and change. British free-traders as well as Marxists believed that Europe was destined to be the bearer worldwide of the new optimism. Whether capitalism brought progress or provoked social revolution, modernization was deemed by them to be inevitable, unavoidable and largely beneficial. Whether European wealth and power was due to imperialism or its superior rationality and culture, whether their motives were good or bad, there seemed something uniquely dynamic about the Europeans that had transformed the evidently stationary world of Asia.

These European self-perceptions were not always imposed; anti-European leaders were as quick and fervent as Bismarck in embracing Western Europe’s optimistic will and its tools, nationalism being foremost among them. For many Asians, the tremendous success of Western Europe’s small countries---which moved from provincial destiny to global supremacy in a few decades---made history seem not only the secular European replacement for Providence; it was a dynamic force that human beings could manipulate with the help of such institutions as the nation-state, a conscript army and an industrial economy.

Since the First World War, however, Europe has been gripped with self-doubt---that is the true meaning of the war’s hundredth anniversary. Much of the best of modern thought and art consists of a profound reflection on the destruction of 19th century beliefs and certainties, and the extraordinary violence of the 20th century--specifically the slaughter of tens of millions of Europeans from 1914 to 1918, and then from 1939 to 1945. Thomas Mann once said that Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a novel about rapacious colonialism, ‘prophetically inaugurated the 20th century.’ Mann and Conrad were among many European artists and thinkers to re-examine Europe assumptions of progress and civilization.

Today, in the summer of 2014, whose many dangerous geopolitical confrontations recall the summer of 1914, that continuing interrogation of European ideas involves all of us---Indians and Chinese and Turks as well as Germans and the British. This is because

the Europeanization of the world is complete. There is hardly a place in the world, not even in Borneo or the Amazonian rainforests, which has not felt the impact of Europe, its ideas and ideologies, and their Americanised versions. Even traditional religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, have had to be configured by many of their adherents along modern Western lines, infused with revolutionary content and nation-building purpose.

Indeed, Europe was also what we in postcolonial Asia were supposed to catch up with; it is what our first postcolonial and secular leaders---Nehru, Nasser, Mao, Sukarno---promised while exhorting their citizens to embrace industrialization and nationalism. Today in the post-Western world, however, that early spell of universal progress through Western-style socialism, or capitalism and democracy has been broken. The optimistic assumptions that these universalist ideologies and techniques will deliver endless growth and political stability cannot be sustained. We face a global crisis, social, political environmental, that puts into question above all our long intellectual submission to Western, and often originally European, ideas of politics and economy.

Whether it is catastrophic wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and disastrous interventions in Libya, the financial crisis of 2008, soaring unemployment in Europe, which seems like a problem with no solution, and is likely to empower far-right parties across the continent, the unresolved crisis of the euro, hideous income disparities in both Europe and the United States, the widespread suspicion that big money has corrupted democratic processes, the absurdly dysfunctional American political system, Edward Snowden's revelations about the National Security Agency, or the dramatic loss of a sense of possibility for young people everywhere---all of this separately and together has not only severely depleted the West's moral authority but also weakened its intellectual hegemony.

Far from confirming the triumph of liberal capitalism and democracy, the end of the cold war, and the collapse of the blocs, inaugurated an era of mixed-up loyalties, dispersed and scattered entanglements. In 1989, there was no hysteria about Hispanic immigration in the United States, the Shiite didn't worry about their security in Pakistan, Christians were safe in Iraq, and Muslims in Britain weren't going off to fight in Syria, India did not face major insurgency on its border or on its heartland, nor was there any danger of Scotland seceding from the United Kingdom. Italy and Spain did not have a big problem with immigration from North Africa, and Hong Kong was not swept with resentment of Mainland Chinese. Europe's most important intellectual export---the nation-state---has never looked more fragile. As I write, ethnic cleansers, jihadists, and ultra-Zionist settlers are redrawing the European map of the Middle East. Bloody insurgents in Central Africa have long muddled national borders. In North Africa, Libya, evidently saved by Western humanitarian intervention, has actually become the first failed petro-state.

The degeneration of political life---the corruption of political parties by corporate interests---in India, the country billed as the world's largest democracy, has happened faster than anyone imagined. Its prime minister is a man implicated in the mass murder of a religious minority, but backed by the most powerful business interests in the country. Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes and jingoistic nationalism also define the politics of Israel, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, and Egypt.

Perhaps our shock over a world in flames is greater because we have been living--in the east and south as well as West and North---with an illusion. We had made many neat projections about the future, deriving them from a range of authoritative sources: McKinsey and Co as well as Karl Marx. We had expected the new countries in Asia and Africa to conform to the nation-state pattern constructed in Europe from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. We had expected these societies to become, like Europe, more secular and instrumentally rational and less religious as economic growth accelerated. We had most recently expected them, after the discrediting of socialism, to imitate the triumph of consumer capitalism in the West, and for the new middle classes to pave the way to democracy. The reality is that these nations instead of converging on the European model were ordering or 'disordering' themselves in ways that made European conceptions appear provincial rather than universal.

The trick of the Mercator map that made Europe bigger than it is also obscured the many discontinuities of class, religion and region of the world outside Europe. There were never more than a handful of countries—Japan and Norway, perhaps---that coincided with culturally homogenous entities; and forms of governance and the state---from Singapore to Saudi Arabia---were always incredibly various. We are also coming to realize that the dynamics of Western nation-building through rapid industrial growth were not and could not be replicated, largely because the enabling conditions of the 19th century---such as small, relatively homogenous populations, or the ability to send surplus populations abroad as soldiers, merchants and missionaries---were missing, especially in the large and populous countries of Asia and Africa. The political and economic institutions and ideologies of Western Europe and the United States had been forged by events---revolts against clerical authority, industrial innovations, capitalist consolidation through colonial conquest---that did not occur elsewhere.

And so religion has not disappeared under the juggernaut of industrial capitalism: not only Islam, Hinduism and the Russian Orthodox Church, but also such quietist religions as Buddhism have experienced militant revivals. Contrary to what many Western ideologues imagined of capitalism (often prettifying its history in the West), it always was compatible with lack of democratic rights. The Russia of Yeltsin and now Putin confirmed this; so has China most recently by achieving a form of capitalist modernity without Europeanization. Other superficially 'Europeanized' parts of the world, such formal democracies as India or South Africa, confront today a problem of 'surplus population' with no colonial possessions to send them to; these latecomers to modernity can only colonize their own territories, uproot their own indigenous peoples: the result is endless insurgencies and counter-insurgencies, wars and massacres, the rise of Maoist guerrillas in India, the increased attraction of unemployed and unemployable youth to extremist, often nihilist, organizations, and the endless misery that provokes thousands of desperate Asians and Africans to make the risky journey to what they see as the center of successful modernity: Europe.

Everywhere you look there is a widespread sense of disorientation and uncertainty, caused by a variety of factors: large-scale, culturally discordant migrations, the eruption of armed and fanatical religious-political movements, and the emergence of new centers of wealth and power in the Persian Gulf, Latin America, and East Asia. These developments, and their consequences (ethnic civil wars, anarchic secessionism, the return of piracy, unreliable global capital flows) have aggravated a widely felt loss of

sovereignty. In practically every country, old social compacts based on a commitment to collective welfare have broken down. Social democracy may be in retreat across Europe; but it had barely been built in large parts of Asia and Africa before being discarded. The poor, deprived of public goods such as health and education, are left to fend for themselves; the rich and the middle class retreat into gated communities. It is every man for himself.

This new world disorder confronts us with very serious questions about the choices we have made in the past and will make about the future. But what role will Europe play? What will be its response to the worldwide crisis?

Paz and Sartre may seem to have spoken early about Europe's postwar insignificance and incapacity. In the 1940s, Europe, assisted by the U.S., was embarking upon a remarkable period of political and socioeconomic reconstruction. Spain and Portugal were far from democracy and closer to Third World despotisms until the 1970s. Parts of rural Italy, Spain and Portugal actually looked like the Third World. But by the 1990s the rights of women, factory workers and sexual minorities were never as secure as in the U.K., France, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. The Europe created by people like Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenauer, and Charles de Gaulle was undoubtedly a great achievement.

European art, literature and philosophy never scaled its prewar heights in the postwar Europe of 'miracle' economies, where American-style consumerism and materialism became the norm, and lazy notions of world history as evolutionary progression, which had been discarded by a previous generation of Europeans, re-entrenched themselves in the discourse. But those of us in war-scarred parts of Asia could only marvel at the peace between Germany and France after centuries of bloody conflict. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany and the establishment of the European Union seemed a major leap forward. We didn't know then about the rickety basis for Europe's economic union, created by unelected technocrats and enforced by faceless bondholders. We were deceived, too, by the apparently instant prosperity of countries like Ireland and Spain, and failed to enquire into its sources. Still, the EU seemed a logical model, for instance, for South Asia, whose fractious new nation-states had sundered centuries-old cultural and economic links between the subcontinent's different regions. Sartre and Paz did not anticipate the EU, which seems like the political regime that Europe has been looking for since the end of the Roman Empire.

But European identity, or Europe's place in the larger world, is still far from being fixed. And it is not possible to believe that the adventure of the European mind has ended in a tame submission to Martha Stewart-ish notions of 'living well.' Europe was the first site of the extraordinary human experiment--in large-scale uprooting, industrialization, urbanization--that is now taking place in large populous countries like India, China and Indonesia. German thinkers produced, from Hegel and Marx to Weber and Sombart and Simmel, the profoundest meditations on the modern world as it came into being. Germany's role was crucial in many other ways. Once upon a time Germany's great intellectual, political and scientific talent destined it to be the principal nation of Europe. The twentieth century ought to have been German in the sense in which the eighteenth

was French. But Germany went on to produce the most terrible variant of European imperialism, and almost brought about the destruction of Europe. In the 21st century, Germany reluctantly confronts its special destiny as America grows more inwards, France languishes, and Britain dithers. Of course, Germany can make a new ‘special relationship’ with China based on economic exchange, and solve for itself, if not for Europe, the great problem confronting the vast majority of 6 billion human beings: how to secure in an interdependent world a dignified and sustainable life amid deepening inequality and tribal animosity. Germany may have earned a break from onerous historical responsibilities that it did not seek.

But Germany and Europe’s message to the rest of the world’s population can no longer be the smooth reassurance that the Euro-American way of life is the best, which others should try to replicate diligently in their own part of the world through nation-building and industrial capitalism. Such one-size-fit-all ideas now lie bankrupt in a bewilderingly diverse and volatile world. The collapse of communism in 1989 led to a new ideological fervor—originating in America and spreading to Europe and rest of the world—on behalf of such values as efficiency, flexibility and marketization. Their effects in Russia already in the 1990s were pointing to a new future of oligarchy and messianic imperialism. Twenty-five years later, their real meaning in the non-Western parts of the world—widespread dispossession, destruction of traditional livelihoods, and denial of dignity—is all too clear.

Today we can see more clearly that the collapse of communism enabled capitalism to renounce its ethic of responsibility; and impossible projects of Westernization—in India as well as Russia—could only stoke aggressive ideologies of anti-Westernism. So at this time we need rather less of American ideologies and convictions and more of the great critical and cosmopolitan tradition of Europe. Certainly, thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Burckhardt, Robert Musil, who upheld paradox, dissent and open-endedness over symmetry and closure have become more pertinent today as our most cherished convictions fade and die. For centuries human beings have tried to understand their world by reference to notions of ultimate design: for a long time it was god, then the secularized modern era brought forth such replacements as revolution, communism, and, most recently, free markets. Looking at our own complex disorder we can no longer accept the idea that reality is an incarnation of an a priori rational or moral order. This realization ought to provoke a fresh un-illusioned reckoning with the world as it exists, and not what we would like it to be.

Reflecting on the world’s ‘pervasive raggedness,’ the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz once spoke of how “the shattering of larger coherences, or seeming such, into smaller ones, uncertainly connected one with another, has made relating local realities with overarching ones, “the world around here” (to adapt Hillary Putnam’s lambent phrase) with the world overall, extremely difficult. If the general is to be grasped at all, and new unities uncovered, it must, it seems, be grasped not directly, all at once, but via instances, differences, variations, particulars—piecemeal, case by case. In a splintered world, we must address the splinters.”

This shouldn’t seem too daunting. It was German romantic historians who recognized the proper diversity of history, the variety of unique traditions in law, religions and literatures. From this acknowledgement of individual cultures—so distinct from the French and Anglo-American standardized view of humanity—German writers

and thinkers had derived their talent for concrete historical understanding and writing. German scholars initiated the re-discovery of Oriental literatures, religious and philosophies. Today, however, there exists a great abyss of knowledge and understanding between Europe and the rest.

It strikes me as a scandal that many well-educated Europeans cannot name a single Indian or Chinese thinker, past or present, and that press commentary and television coverage of the outside world remains imprisoned by obsolete national and civilizational assumptions that one can find just as easily in the *New York Times* or *CNN*. It isn't as though there are no new horizons of thought and feeling. For nearly two decades now scholars and thinkers have used deeper and more extensive research than ever to trace the origins of our world of movement, the exchange of goods and ideas, the growth of hybrid cultures and their fluid identities. Previous histories in Europe may have almost deliberately ignored significant Chinese and Indian works on science and mathematics as well as political thought and philosophy. A range of contemporary scholars, from Amartya Sen to David Shulman, have done important work in liberating intellectual work from the ghettos of both Western and Eastern self-regard, and showing that there are no cultural boundaries or geographical constraints on values like tolerance and liberty. Scholars exploring Asia's early modernity have told us that, contrary to Hegel's images of an Asia in intellectual slumber, awaiting enlightenment from Europe, India in the seventeenth century was a place of great intellectual vitality and creative endeavor. In India, for instance, Muslim, Hindu, and Jain intellectuals produced work of tremendous interest and quality. Ideas circulated around India, through the Persianate and Arabic worlds, and also between India and Europe.

It would of course be mistake to replace the old Euro-centric view with an Asia-centric one. We must regard with extreme skepticism what Asian autocrats such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamed used to call "Asian values," notions opposed to ideas of democracy, secularism, and human rights (especially when the prime minister of Hungary declares his admiration for the illiberal democracies of the East). We have to reject the rejectionism of Muslim fanatics. At the same time, we must acknowledge that Europe—particularly the Europe of Berlusconi and Viktor Orban---does not have the last word on either on how to live in the modern world or on how to think about it.

Western power, cultural as well as military and economic, created the categories in which we have long thought about the world. Most of our major presuppositions, arguments, examples and generalizations have been drawn from the stock of European historical experience. But this undoubtedly great reservoir does not fully equip us to understand today's rapidly changing social and political landscape, which reveals not only the paradoxical facts of profound interconnectedness and great inequality, but also a vivid panorama of struggles and conflicts that will define the immediate future.

Take for instance, the tribal insurgents fighting multinational corporations in India. Governing 'liberated' zones deep within Indian territory, these insurgents known as Maoists remind you of the struggles of indigenous peoples in Latin America, the Chiapas, rather than anything in Europe. They do not seek revolution; they just want to be left alone in their forests. Less militant agitators, such as the villagers in Orissa who successfully campaigned against bauxite mining by corporates on their sacred land, also appear to belong to a 'pre-historic' socio-political formation. The unbroken devotion of the Tibetans to the Dalai Lama is one of the many indications that modernization and

high economic growth has not led, and will not lead, to secularization---it is more likely to provoke a kind of religious politics that we saw first in Iran. In Indonesia, a small-city mayor called Joko Widodo has become, with ameliorative policies aimed at the urban poor (slum-dwellers, street vendors), the preferred alternative to a discredited breed of politicians---mostly manipulators of party machineries and lackeys of international capital---that can no longer pass off routine elections as democracy. And if Iraq achieves a modicum of stability it won't be by reviving the doomed project of nation-state in the Middle East; it will be achieved through a return to the Ottoman-style confederal institutions that devolve power and guarantee minority rights.

To sum up: the European path to modernity can no longer be regarded as 'normal'; it cannot be the standard against which historical change in other parts of the world is measured. Europeans had created their own kind of modernity in the very particular historical circumstances of the 19th and 20th century, and other people have been trying since then, with varying degrees of success, to imitate it. But there are, and always were, other ways of conceiving of the state, the nation, economy, and the good life. They all have their own specific difficulties and challenges. Nevertheless, it will be possible to understand them only through an open and sustained engagement with the experience of non-Western societies, and their political and intellectual traditions. Such an effort, formidable in itself, would also go against every instinct of the self-regarding universalism Europe has upheld for two centuries. But Europe will need to make it in order to avoid the fate that Paz and Sartre prophesized: intellectual enervation and historical insignificance.