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In search of Europe

The European Union no longer inspires French people with enthusiasm. A recent IPSOS survey on "Factors that divide the French" (*Le Monde*, 22 January 2014) showed that only 31% of respondents have confidence in the EU, that only 45% want France to remain a member, that 70% want more power for national institutions and that 33% would like France to leave the Euro zone.

Nonetheless, on reflection, the reasons to aspire to further European integration are as strong as ever. There are many fields in which such united action would be beneficial. Ecology, for example, since ecological threats know no borders. The river Rhine was no barrier to the Chernobyl radioactive cloud, nor does it stop the spread of microbes or chemical substances. Or scientific research, where the cost of projects, whether for combating disease or climate change or in communications or technology, necessitates co-operation between a number of countries. Or immigration: since people allowed to enter one country of the Schengen Area can settle in any other, the borders that now need controlling are the frontiers of Europe, not those of the individual countries. In the economic sphere, the EU with its population of nearly 500 million people has means of action far exceeding those of any of its member states, allowing it to give its inhabitants' access to the advantages of globalisation while protecting them from its disadvantages. Major multinationals are today beyond the control of individual states, and action by the EU can have more effect on them. What about security, since terrorists and criminals seem to be able to move more freely between countries than the police or the judiciary? Or energy? Since supplies can now come from a neighbouring country, is it not clear that this question must be dealt with at European level?

I could easily continue adding to this list, but I wish to say a few words about another desirable development, which would be to endow Europe with a military force of its own. It is true that armed conflicts between EU member states have become impossible – in this respect, the wishes of the founders of united Europe have been realised. The new generations of Europeans born after the Second World War sometimes have the impression that war is a thing of the past. However, one need but have kept abreast of recent historical events to realise that the conflicts of all kinds which marked human history from its origins are far from having been eliminated. Whatever the explanation for this – whether biological or sociological – the facts are incontrovertible: the aggressiveness of human beings (or groups) is not declining. If we do not want to be the passive victims of such aggressions and to renounce what we hold most dear, we have to be ready to defend ourselves and therefore we need an army.

As a matter of fact, the governments of the countries of Europe pinned all their hopes not on the gradual disappearance of war and all kinds of violence, tyranny or mass crime, nor on the protection that may be offered by law and international institutions. Since the end of the Second World War, they have chosen a more traditional means of protection, shielding themselves behind the army of another country, their faithful ally the United States. This solution offers them a twofold advantage: firstly, their alliance with the most powerful army in the world shelters them from all kinds of dangers; secondly, they significantly reduce their military spending and can allocate their resources to other priorities. They thus have the impression that they are benefiting from a sort of free ride, since they have the advantages of a defence (security) without its disadvantages (the costs). However, are these advantages really entirely cost-free?

The problem lies in the fact that if we entrust a third party with our defence, we waive our right to disagree with the way it is ensured - they can always tell us that it is the only possible way. At the same time, it is by no means certain that public opinion in Europe approves all the forms taken by this defence. Let me cite three examples.

President Bush declared an all-out war on terrorism, and one of the methods of waging this war was to use torture when interrogating prisoners. It is well-known that, in the course of history, many governments, including those of democratic countries, have closed their eyes to acts of torture when they deemed that the circumstances so required. However, the Americans' decision was novel in that this was the first time that a democratic country instituted torture not only in its practice, but also in its legislation. Nevertheless, no European government publicly expressed even the slightest reservations concerning this approach, not to mention any condemnation of it. The obvious explanation was that these governments themselves benefited from the intelligence extracted under torture. The outrage caused at world level by this recourse to torture was therefore not targeted at the US government alone but also at its European partners.

President Obama did not close the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, as he had promised during his first election campaign in 2008. However, he drew conclusions from the indignant reactions the use of torture had provoked in other parts of the world and even in his own country. These conclusions are actually quite paradoxical. Since it is indeed shocking to torture prisoners so as to force them to reveal information, he decided that those concerned would no longer be taken prisoner but would instead be executed. This practice was made possible by progress in drone technology, giving the capability to send missiles remotely controlled from US territory to strike individuals in Pakistan, the Yemen or Somalia. This intervention technique offers many advantages: with drones there are less victims than are caused by the military occupation of a foreign country, they are far less costly and they involve no risk for American military personnel, since the latter do not leave the bases in their home country. This policy in fact meets with virtually no opposition in

the United States, or from allied European governments. France, visibly full of admiration for the possibilities offered by drones, has moreover recently ordered a few of these craft. And yet there are many reasons to be outraged at this practice. Firstly, because it is impossible to avoid cases of mistaken identity (this can be deduced from the manner in which Bin Laden was executed, by a human commando and not by a drone). Secondly, because all suspects are automatically declared guilty, and all those who are guilty are sentenced to death without any form of trial, while at the same time it is known that misinformation and manipulation are rife in intelligence circles. Lastly, because when the drone explodes it is not just the target who is killed but also other people finding themselves nearby. This practice reflects a complete disregard for law and sanctions the deployment of brute force. It brings to mind urban gang warfare in which targeted assassinations of the leaders of rival criminal gangs are common practice (except that the leaders of the terrorist movements do not yet have access to drones).

In recent years the United States has had to contend with information leaks concerning the treatments it reserves for adversaries in times of war, and also for its allies in times of peace, ranging from the commission of war crimes to cyber spying. Surveillance contributes to national security, but it must not escape all forms of supervision and accountability. However, none of these disclosures has resulted in those responsible being held liable for their acts. At the same time, those behind the leaks have been hunted down with the utmost rigour. Two of them sought refuge in extraterritorial locations, Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy in London and Edward Snowden in Moscow international airport (he has since been granted asylum in Russia). A third, soldier Bradley Manning, was arrested and imprisoned under conditions worthy of Guantanamo Bay. He has recently been tried and sentenced to 35 years' prison for espionage related offences. Let me remind that his greatest crime was releasing video material showing American soldiers deliberately slaughtering civilians in Iraq. The soldiers concerned have never been bothered. Once again, there was no protest from the countries of Europe, which silently acquiesced to the persecution suffered by the whistle-blowers and even supported the measures taken against them.

To sum up, the European Union at present remains a US protectorate, and the price of its security is its independence. Although NATO, a US-Euro army under American command, was established to protect European territory, in accordance with its leaders' wishes NATO troops are now sent to distant theatres of operations. On the international political scene, the 28 dwarfs of the European Union do not represent a genuine force; they do not form one of the poles of the new multi-polar world.

For these reasons it seems clear to me that Europe should become a military power. More precisely, as I suggested in a book published ten years ago ("The new world disorder", 2003), it should become a "tranquil power". By that I meant that Europe should set itself a number of limited tasks: defending European territory, possessing

deterrent weapons, preventing any armed confrontation within European territory, intervening on an ad hoc basis in the rest of the world at the request of friendly governments or to prevent genocide. Other tasks would however be ruled out. This military force would not seek to guarantee global security or to stamp out tyranny or terrorism. Nor would it participate in any conflict between Japan and China, India and Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia and Iran. Nor would it be used to conduct so-called "humanitarian wars" – a contradictory word combination meaning interventions justified by the desire to promote democracy and human rights, but which compromise these noble ideals through the means used to attain them. War is a "means" whose force exceeds the intentions of those that instigate it and whose consequences are unpredictable, as can be seen from the very mixed results of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

If there are all these good reasons for desiring a reinforcement of the common institutions, how can one explain the pessimism or the scepticism that seems to afflict the people of Europe? Without detailing the results of the studies already available on this subject, one finding is that the current financial and economic crisis plays an important role here: it is first and foremost the victims of this crisis that reject the EU. The survey already cited showed that 67% of respondents from managerial or professional backgrounds are in favour of reinforcing the EU, but they do not constitute the majority of the population. In addition, politicians in all of the countries are reluctant to make further progress in building common institutions. Their reaction brings to mind that of the mayors of small French municipalities which are encouraged to form "communities of municipalities", making it possible to merge a number of municipalities into a new local government body. These mayors cautiously prefer to retain their hold over a weak entity, rather than being relegated to a subordinate role in a strong one.

Another reason for this reluctance is probably the lack of an "identity" component in the EU project. Many people have voiced their disappointment that European politicians are happy to concern themselves with the removal of customs barriers and its consequences, or with bureaucratic rules and regulations, but have lost sight of the European project itself. The question has therefore been raised whether the EU could not be given a further political impetus by highlighting and reinforcing its cultural identity, with culture becoming the third pillar of the European construction process alongside the economy and judicial or political institutions. It is also hoped that this will confer a little more soul on the EU, a spiritual and emotional dimension that is missing elsewhere. This task is imagined to be easy since, in today's Europe, a consensus is more easily reached on the continent's great cultural monuments than on administrative regulations or economic decisions.

The underlying reasoning is understandable: a sense of common identity would strengthen the European project. To use the vocabulary of the eighteenth century, one might say that a political idea is more effective if it is borne not just by common

interests, but also by shared passions; but passions are unleashed only if we feel that our very identities are affected. To feel a European solidarity, we also need to feel that we share a common identity. However, in that case we need to begin by clarifying the content of this identity.

In the past there has been no shortage of attempts to bring to the fore the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Europe. One need but recall the debate concerning the draft EU constitution, in particular the question whether it should include a reference to Europe's "Christian roots". However, attempts of this kind have existed for far longer. In the wake of the First World War the poet and essayist Paul Valéry suggested an interpretation of this identity that caused something of a stir. He basically said that the peoples he called "European" were those who in the course of their history had undergone three great influences, those of Rome, Jerusalem and Athens. Rome's legacy was empire, with organised state power, law and institutions and citizenship. From Jerusalem, or rather Christianity, Europeans had inherited subjective morality, conscience-searching and universal justice. Lastly, Athens had bequeathed them a taste for knowledge and rational reasoning, the ideal of harmony and the idea of man as the measure of all things. Anyone who could lay claim to this triple legacy, concluded Valéry, could rightly be deemed to be European.

This proposition was in turn much criticised and frequently supplemented and updated. However, it also raises a more fundamental objection, relevant to any attempt to define identity in substantial terms. When we try to pin down its component features, we discover that the task is harder than might have been thought. The reason for this difficulty is twofold and somewhat paradoxical: the characteristics on which we all agree are either too general or too specific. Too general in that they have a universal dimension and are not specifically European. Scientific and technical rationalism may have developed in Europe, but today it is an attribute of all humankind. The same applies to a number of standards which, although not respected everywhere, are regarded the world over as – at least - a desirable façade to be presented. These are the values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human dignity and human rights. Too specific, on the other hand, if only because the culture of a population group is closely bound up with its language, which, as we know, helps it to form a specific world view. Each people's own collective memory plays the same role. The great works that we love to identify as constituting European culture were created within particular traditions.

A further difficulty lies in the fact that European societies have existed for so long that there has been sufficient time for them to give birth to some widely differing ideas. It could be said that each theory developed in Europe has also led to a counter-theory, as one of the characteristic features of the European tradition is in point of fact the exercise of critical thought: here all values can be subjected to scrutiny. The idea that all human beings are equal has its roots in European history, and yet the concept of slavery is by no means absent either. Religious proselytism and secularism are both

part of European history, as are the revolutionary spirit and conservatism. Tolerance is European, but so are fanaticism and wars of religion. Respect for individual autonomy is a European achievement, and yet the subjection of foreign peoples to the will of the strongest, colonialism and imperialism itself, are also part of the European heritage. Liberalism belongs to the European tradition, as does Communism. This characteristic of European history may be a source of pride, but it does not make it any easier to identify what is essentially European. If we retain only those elements of times gone by that suit us here in the present, we make a highly selective reading of the past and betray genuine history, replacing it with a "right-thinking" righteous history consistent with the "politically correct" views of our era. Moreover, those calling for Europe to repent its shameful past of slavery and colonialism today out-number those that selectively recall only its more glorious achievements.

Lastly, there is not a hermetical seal between European traditions and those of other continents. From the very outset European thinkers absorbed the contributions of other civilisations: Egypt, Persia, India, China. Today, European cultural characteristics can be found very far distant from Europe; at the same time, non-European inventions have spread throughout our continent.

The very attempt to identify a substantive, irreducible core therefore poses problems. Does this therefore mean that we are obliged to abandon the idea of a European identity?

I do not think so. However, this identity would have to be founded on what distinguishes Europe from other major population groupings, in particular the world's most populous and largest countries: China, India, the United States, Russia or Brazil. In comparison with these other parts of the world, Europe is distinguished by the multiplicity of states existing within its territory, which in turn results in a multiplicity of cultures and languages. If it is compared with China, which is fairly similar in area, the contrast is striking: a single State, on one hand, and currently some forty independent states, on the other. I would therefore suggest that the unity of European culture lies in the way it manages the different regional, national, religious and cultural identities that compose it, according them a new status and taking advantage of this very plurality. Europe's spiritual identity does not require the erasure of particular cultures and local memories. It consists not in a list of proper names or a compendium of general ideas, but in the adoption of the same attitude towards diversity.

If the sole characteristic of European identity were acceptance of otherness or of diversity, it would be an extremely weak identity, since it could incorporate absolutely any foreign ingredient. It should therefore be clarified that this identity resides not in diversity itself, but in the status given to it. In this way a purely negative and relative trait is transformed into an absolute, positive quality; difference becomes identity and plurality unity. And it really is a unity, however strange this may seem: it is a way of

giving what is different the *same* status. It is solely in this sense that the European identity can be claimed by the EU and contribute to the reinforcement of its project.

In fact, until the end of the Second World War, while benefiting from its inner plurality, Europe also suffered greatly from it. It must not be forgotten that war has been a constant throughout the continent's history, and the names of the wars may have changed but not their disastrous consequences, from the Roman Empire's struggles against the barbarian populations of the North to the global conflicts of the 20th century, via – take your pick – the Hundred Years' War, the Thirty Years' War, the Seven Years' War, and so on. It needed the trauma of the 1939-1945 war for the European Union to come into being; its starting point was a desire to eradicate war between member countries and renunciation of the use of force in cases of conflict (for the conflicts themselves have not disappeared). Thanks to acceptance of this principle, the EU member states now enjoy a previously unknown peace in their relations.

Having thus set an ultimate limit on the consequences of diversity, the countries of Europe have been able to explore different forms of coexistence to their advantage. It could be said that the minimum form of coexistence is tolerance: one does not approve of others or borrow anything from them, one merely refrains from persecuting them. Tolerance is an essential progress, the crowning achievement of the religious struggles initiated in the 16th and 17th centuries, and entails that disagreements between groups should no longer be settled by resorting to force, but solely by negotiation and persuasion. The thinkers of those times, in particular those of the Enlightenment, were the first to seek the positive effects of the pluralism embodied by Europe.

The countries or cultures cohabiting in Europe however did not make do with mutually tolerating each other, they engaged in stronger interactions. Montesquieu stressed the beneficial effects of coexistence; it leads to emulation and competition, with everyone trying to prove that they are as good as or better than their neighbour. A contemporary of Montesquieu, David Hume saw another advantage here, the development of critical thought: thanks to an observer's distance from the culture being observed, he or she does not share the same "prejudices". Aided by the way others see us, or the way we see ourselves through the eyes of an imagined other (it was Montesquieu who came up with the idea of Persians' perception of the French), it becomes possible to distinguish between "custom" and "nature", to separate arguments based on the authority of tradition from rational arguments. A comparison between particular identities teaches us to examine every doctrine with a critical eye.

Pluralism also has another consequence: it prevents one of the participants from assuming a hegemonic position and tyrannising the others. It was for this reason that Voltaire was so glad that there were thirty religions in England: none of them could have "plenitude of power" - the term used at the time of the conflicts between popes and emperors - and reign supreme. Montesquieu regarded the same principle as the

basis of "moderate" (and therefore benevolent) government: so that there could be checks on power, not all powers must be concentrated in the same hands.

The principle of secularism, which has now been adopted in one form or another by virtually all the countries of Europe, makes it possible to go one step further. Not only must there be mutual tolerance between religions, but a non-religious authority, the State, is entrusted with the task of ensuring their appropriate distribution over public territory and guaranteeing that each citizen also has a personal sphere lying outside the control of both the State itself and the religious communities.

Lastly, mention must be made of the concept of "general will", as defined by Rousseau, distinguishable from a hypothetical "will of all". The latter corresponds to unanimity among all citizens within a State, a unanimity which is highly unlikely and which, if left unchecked, leads to a tyranny of the majority. The former corresponds to a "sum of differences", a point of view that takes account of disagreements but is aimed at doing what is in the general interest. Kant would take up this idea of Rousseau's in his appeal for "common sense". Pursuing his predecessor's line of thought, Kant considered that this did not involve a super-human effort: "In itself there is nothing more natural" he said "than to put ourselves in the place of any other man." The relationship between cultures, societies and States within a larger whole can be conceptualised along the same lines. The general interest will not be clear to all, but it can be determined by reasoned, well-informed debate. At the end of the 18th century, Condorcet expressed his prudent conclusion on the possibility of reaching a consensus in the following terms: "If I examine the current state of enlightenment in Europe, I see, despite the diversity of governments, of institutions, of usages, of prejudices, the enlightened men of Europe as a whole agreeing on what is true ...". There will never be general agreement on everything, but agreement among "enlightened men" is possible.

In the present European construction process the question has often been raised whether, in order to attain a common identity, Europeans would be capable, to begin with, of adopting a common memory. The "general will" model as distinct from that of the "will of all" could be useful here, as a common memory of this kind is really possible only if it takes the form of a "general memory". A "memory of all" would require that particular memories become identical, which is an unattainable and moreover undesirable goal. Requiring each French, German or Polish person to have the same memory of the past would be as futile as asking them to give up belonging to their community. It is however possible to ask them to take others' point of view into account, to highlight similarities and differences and to situate them in a general context; this attitude is indeed fairly common, admittedly not with everyone, but among sufficiently "enlightened" men and women of goodwill. A European "general memory" would conversely be a "sum of differences", taking into consideration national or regional points of view. As we have seen, it is also a perspective for an education for all.

The Europeans of tomorrow will therefore not be those who share the same memory, but those who can acknowledge in the "silence of passions", to cite Diderot, that their neighbour's memory is as legitimate as their own. By confronting their version of the past and that of their one-time enemies, they will discover that their people did not always play the desirable roles of hero or victim, and they will escape the Manichean temptation to see good on one side of a border and evil on the other, the former being identified with "us", and the latter with "them", and more generally avoid the trap of perceiving the past purely in terms of sweeping moral generalisations, such as "good" or "evil", as if the multi-faceted, complex experience of millions of people over the centuries could be reduced to this.

European identity therefore does not replace the European peoples' own national or regional identity, but is additional to it – just as the administrative and political bodies of the EU do not oust the institutions specific to each level, but govern and guide their action. National governments have lost many of their powers, but have not become superfluous for all that. It is within the nation that the major forms of social solidarity come into play. Medical assistance is made available to those without sufficient resources through the contributions paid by all. Retired people are able to receive a pension thanks to the efforts of the working population. It is also with the latter's contributions that unemployment benefits can be funded. It is thanks to national solidarity that all children in the country can receive a free education. Health care, work, pensions and education are essential components of our individual lives. Similarly, an individual can assert his or her rights only to the extent that the State guarantees them and takes action to safeguard them if necessary. No matter how truly cosmopolitan we may feel, we are never citizens of the world, but merely of a given country. At the same time, when all the citizens of a country have the same culture they are guaranteed access to the same social space.

Pluralism, which is therefore the foundation of European identity, can also guide our future action and serve as a model for other parts of the world. Monistic temptations are never far away, and dogmatism is the easiest way of expressing political passions, whether different forms of nationalism or any other hegemonic doctrine, such as neoliberalism today. The advantages of Europe are currently still only potential. They are nevertheless real, and it is possible that, one day, the European tortoise will overtake the hares racing along ahead of it, especially if it turns out that they have not taken the right direction.