eurozine

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Europe revisited

Neighbourly conflict and the return of history

Post 1989 and subsequent EU enlargement, an absence of emotional bonds holding together European societies has resulted in a revival of traditions of cultural difference, writes Austrian diplomat and historian Emil Brix. Europe has experienced not the end of history, but the end of the tacit postwar agreement not to talk about history. These developments are strenghtened by the way Europe deals with growing migrant populations, whose exlusion is cemented by a multiculturalist discourse of "tolerance" and "dialogue". To overcome cutural conflict, neighbourly borders must be seen as opportunities for integration and not for rupture.

The growing and deepening European Union is a strange political animal. There is no European people or common European public space in sight and ideas about Europe differ greatly between and within participating nations. As might be expected, such contradictions contain a good and a bad message. The good news is that the more that countries are integrated into the European Union, the more Europe will again be based firmly on competing ethnic and state identities. The bad news is that a Europe based firmly on competing ethnic and state identities will see a revival of traditional neighbourly conflicts. Any neighbour is a challenge to the very principles of ethnicity (territory, culture, borders as clear identity markers). Is it the reality or an illusion that since 1945, after the experience of two World Wars and the achievements of modernity, Europeans tied the Gulliver of "ethnicity" to the ground for good?

"Humans fear nothing more than being touched by the unknown" –– the striking first sentence of Elias Canetti's imposing study *Crowds and Power* sets the tone for the rest of the work. Canetti is concerned with the fact that closeness or proximity constitutes one of the fundamental problems that we have to experience –– not only from the point of view of the individual, but also as far as power structures are concerned. The notion of power and authority is really about identity and the fear that identity is being touched by something that is very close to us. Canetti was not the first to say so. He was, at least indirectly, referring to Sigmund Freud, who had also analyzed neighbourly relations. Freud's comment about the "narcissism of small differences" contains much truth –– also when we look at neighbourly relations of collectives. According to Freud, "We are always afraid of those who are very close to us because there is so much that we have in common with them." Tendencies of inclusion and exclusion are always competing in neighbourhood policies. The narcissism of small differences is something that is evidently very much on the political agenda when we talk about Europe. It was the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 that brought proximity back to Europe, making old borders resound anew. How do we deal with such a major paradigm shift, one that replaced one fundamental border in Europe for a myriad of traditions?

Austria provides a good example of the growing dilemmas. After 1989, Austria experienced very directly the meaning of the end of the East–West division of Europe, and how neighbourly relations started to regain traditional dimensions. Austria was among those countries where, before 1989, most people tended to say that it would be a good thing to overcome the Iron Curtain and defeat Communism. Afterwards, most people thought: fair enough, but don't let the neighbours onto our labour market and don't let them upset our contented seclusion. For many people in the East and the West, the new Europe meant what Canetti had described as a challenge to one's identity from the unknown. The whole idea of what neighbours and borders stood for politically in Europe changed after 1989 and the subsequent EU enlargement discussions.

At the same time, there seemed to be some truth in what Francis Fukuyama poignantly called "the end of history". Over ten years ago, Fukuyama wrote about the success of liberalism as the only surviving political model. Today, most liberal thinkers admit that their theories have an inbuilt deficit regarding emotions that can hold societies together and create a feeling of community. The fear of neighbours and the absence of emotional bonds results in a strong revival of European traditions of cultural difference. Europe has experienced not the end of history, but the end of the tacit postwar agreement not to talk about history too much. These developments are further strenghtened by the way Europe deals with growing migrant populations. Multiculturalism imprisons the migrant in exclusion, which it seems to legitimize through cultural discourse about "tolerance" and "dialogue", instead of on how to create common bonds.

If I summed up the ambivalent state of affairs of the new Europe in one sentence, it would be: "history, geography, and faith are back in town". This is what present–day discussions about Europe, European visions, and European relations are really about. The big notions of history, geography, and faith are back in political thought and discourse. There are many obvious examples. The return of history as potential memory is very evident. Who should feel responsible for mass murder in Europe in the twentieth century and how do moral claims compare regarding victims of Hitler and/or Stalin? In Europe, history easily turns into the politics of memory. It seems that nothing of European History is allowed to be forgotten when political strategies are being discussed today. Historical memory becomes an instrument of politics.

My example is a recent one concerning neighbourly relations between Slovenia and Austria; this has always been a delicate issue because of the heritage of the Hapsburg Empire and overlapping language territories. The present conflict concerns a stone –– the *Fürstenstein*, on which the dukes of Carantania were sworn in; it is highly symbolic because it was used to bestow legitimate authority on a territory that today lies partly in Austria and partly in Slovenia. It dates from the seventh century, when it was used as a stone of oath on which the rulers of Carantania promised, in the Slovene language, to govern justly. Today, this is seen both as an early form of Slovene statehood and of Austrian–Carinthian regional identity. The problem is that the stone is not under the jurisdiction of Slovenia, but is housed in an Austrian museum in Klagenfurt, the capital of Carinthia. German–speaking Carinthians accept that the Slovene language was spoken at these enthronement ceremonies in the seventh century. But they also say that the stone and what it symbolizes has become an important part of Austrian–Carinthian regional identity.

This is the usual symbolic neighbourhood conflict that we find between many counries: take the conflict between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece about the term "Macedonia", or other fights over symbolic politics emerging with the return of history. The special problem in the Slovene–Austrian case is that the Slovene National Bank decided to put an image of this stone on the two–cent coin that Slovenia will use in the Eurozone. The Austrian reaction to the Slovene national appropriation of this symbol was predicatable: the Carinthian regional goverment decided to protest officially and asked the Austrian government to do the same. The argument is that Slovenia is challenging the territorial integrity of Carinthia by representing the image of an object which has always been on present–day Austrian territory. There is an obvious battle over memory at hand. Even implementing a common European currency can arouse internal European conflicts to do with neighbourhood.

The interesting angle to this discussion is that hardly anybody suggested looking at the issue from a European point of view (as a chance to promote common cultural heritage). The *Fürstenstein* issue is proof that, in the tradition of Europe, neighbourhood relations and border situations have always had certain features: first, borders change from time to time; second, European nations have common histories and traditions that we can use in common; and third, there are symbols of early quasi–democratic structures, in which a ruler had to promise to those who were subjected to his power, in their own language, that he would rule them justly. These may be promises or cautious warnings for the future of Europe. At the moment, the battle of words is driven by the question of who has a national claim to the memory that the stone contains.

This is just one example of how history is returning. Very similar things can be said about geography and about who "owns" geography. The return of geography is even more dangerous and challenging because it includes discussions of geopolitics. European discussions increasingly accept geopolitical thinking and act accordingly. It has become fashionable not only for politicians or historians but also for intellectuals to talk about Europe as a potential global player. We tend to speak about geography in a totally different way than many Europeans did before 1989, when there was a clear–cut border of identities between East and West, a distinction that was never really accepted or believed by central European dissidents. Ironically, it was the end of the East–West division that brought back the geographical position of a country, east or west, as a relevant political issue. Poland concentrates on the eastern dimension of Europe, Romania discusses Black Sea issues, Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia strongly support the European integration of the western Balkan countries. Political thinking about geography, for instance the question of routing oil and gas pipelines between Russia or Turkey and western Europe, is all about resources and the geopolitical implications of resource allocation. Europe is heavily steeped in new geographical discussions about traffic corridors, migration routes, energy consumption, and fuel supply lines and their routes from East to West and West to East.

It may be less surprising that "faith" is back in town, more due to increasing Muslim immigration than to September 11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London. The return of faith and religion to the public sphere is not all that surprising, since faith as a driving force for politics had never really gone away. It remained strong in some parts of Europe even if it was sidelined by the idea of a separation between politics and religion. The Turkish example is well–known. And it was not long ago that churches were burned down for

political reasons in places as far apart as Northern Ireland and the Balkans. I will recount a personal experience of the coincidence of faith, geography, and history. When I worked in Cracow in the early 1990s as an Austrian diplomat, there was a fervent public discussion about whether the Greek Catholic Church in the southeast of Poland should regain some of the monasteries and churches which in the late eighteenth century the Austrian emperor Joseph II had transferred from Roman Catholics to Greek Catholics, and which in communist Poland had been returned to the Roman Catholic Church. After 1989, Pope John Paul II decided that, as a sign of reconciliation, the buildings should be returned to the small Greek Catholic community there. Unfortunately, some Roman Catholic believers in remote parts of southeastern Poland opposed the return and organized public protests and sit–ins in the churches. Fist fighting even took place between members of the congregations of the two churches. So what happened? Greek Catholic believers sent me letters saying that Austria was obliged to help in the same way that Joseph II did in 1782. I couldn't believe my eyes when I received the first letters. Europe seems to resound with ideas of continuity.

Regarding the present crisis of European integration, the question is whether history, geography, and faith are part of the problem or part of the solution. The typical central European would clearly say "both". Most of the conflicting traditions of Europe are not "politically correct" but visibly alive and need to be addressed.

In Europe, collective identities have been shaped by complex and often conflicting layers of memory that make communities highly susceptible to the politics of memory. Orhan Pamuk's book on Istanbul belongs to a long line of studies on the different layers of urban collective memory. Pamuk shows how these layers are interwoven in political decision making and in our everday thinking.

In western Europe, at least, there has been no change of state borders for a long time. At the same time, it is part of European tradition that changes of borders are possible and likely. Before 1989, there was a sort of compromise between East and West: instead of changes to borders or regimes, human rights for eastern Europeans. This is what Helsinki was all about. This was an exceptional period in European history and we have to take into account that this may be not the case in the future: consider all the new states and the new border lines that were drawn after 1989. It is no coincidence that all the new states from the Baltics to Slovenia are based on the idea of the ethnic nation–state, even in cases where they include strong ethnic minorities (with the exception of Bosnia–Herzegovina, which is not yet functioning properly).

In Europe, all multi–national empires failed over time. Present day exceptions are only small and economically sound states. It helps to be wealthy, as the examples of Switzerland and Belgium show. In Belgium, economic problems and growing interethnic rivalry seem to be related. European nations have a desire for unequivocal borders but have problems in achieving them. Historically, there have been three strategies for creating clear ethnic borders between or within states in Europe: massive population shifts, assimilation, and genocide. The task that lies before us in some parts of the continent is huge when we look at these strategies, which have been in use throughout European history. Minority protection must remain a priority on the European agenda.

From the Renaissance and the Enlightenment onwards, Europe has traditionally separated politics from passion. The separation of state and

religion is part of the European model, and the European integration process after 1945 deliberately avoided cultural issues. But a radical separation of politics from passion has its shortcomings. Today, European leaders ask: "How can we create a spirit of European commonality?" Without accepting some form of European patriotism (of "irrational" emotional bonds) we will not be able to create any real interest in European matters.

Contemporary European politics seems to centre around spaces of identity rather than around ideas of progress. The dynamics of "time" has given way to the dynamics of "space". Urban sociologists such as Edward Soja and historians such as Karl Schlögel formulate a "spatial turn" in cultural studies: in Europe, space is becoming more interesting than time. As a result, there is renewed interest in the politics of memory, in issues related to identities and borders. Political parties gather momentum by mobilizing the fear of proximity.

Critical concepts about European traditions and European perspectives all deal with the question of borders. If there is something specific that we can learn from the ambiguous traditions of European cooperation, then it is the question of how Europe deals with borders, be they internal, external, real, or imaginary. Have Europeans developed a specific ethics of borders? The key question is to understand borders not only as identity markers or as lines of separation between different identities, but to see them as spaces of transition between identities that have something in common. On a continent proud of cultural diversity, it is worth working towards a situation where borders stand for integration and not for rupture. Europe has much to do in order to find some balance between centres and peripheries. Who decides on where the centres or peripheries are in Europe? What is the core of a national or a European identity, and does the centre or the periphery decide on this question? When you ask this question in Paris you get a different answer than in Timisoara. When you ask it in Klagenfurt you get a different answer than in Vienna.

There is a need for European discussions about neighbourhood as a potential for cross–border solidarity and for cross–border conflict. The future of Europe will rather be decided at the peripheries than in the corridors of power in our capital cities. The myriad of visible and invisible borders turns everybody into a neighbour, and may force Europeans to interpret borders as places of transition. Europe revisited may provide exactly this message: borders are unstable identity markers even if they take the very physical shape of a Berlin Wall, or the wall in the Czech town of Usti nad Labem, planned to be built in order to separate Roma and non–Roma population. My modest proposal to promote the quality of borders as a European value must sound quite ambitious.

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