# A PROUSTIAN PROJECT FOR EUROPE: EXPLORING A POSSIBLE FUTURE

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# ASP Research Papers

**1. Turbulent times call for rational public debate not confrontation**

In times of great turbulence, when there is a need to think most clearly, it becomes more difficult to do so. At such times it seems impossible to hold calm, rational debates because there are only urgent, complex problems, and risks, on the horizon.

Thirty years ago, after the implosion of the Soviet Union and the change of direction in China, that horizon seemed cloudless from the perspective of the Western world in general and Europe in particular. There was talk of the "end of history" and, with it, the triumph of Enlightenment culture, democracy, the rule of law and a globalisation associated with growth, technical innovation and the dissemination of information. Everything seemed to point in the right direction; everything, if handled with care, absolutely everything, was within an order.

That is no longer the prevailing sentiment. Today, in Europe (as a whole, and in many European countries), the impression is that of a house in (considerable) disarray. The nature of capitalism is coming under increasing scrutiny. Its critics point to excessive inequality, job insecurity, wage stagnation among the working classes and large sections of the middle classes, and a high risk of environmental degradation. They also point out that democracy itself is suffering from the profound disaffection of its citizens with their political classes. The different European nations do not manage either to bring about their integration into a unitary political agency or even to integrate into one that is sufficiently well-coordinated to have a coherent long-term economic policy, an articulated geopolitical strategy and a shared public space. Evidence of this is clear: the tensions mounting between the northern, central, eastern and Mediterranean countries, not to mention the withdrawal of the United Kingdom; the limited integrative capacity of that unlikely triangle of Brussels, Paris and Berlin, half powerhouse and half power vacuum; and the appeals by some that Europe should resign itself, once and for all, to organising itself as merely a confederation.

One of the aggravating factors is that those now facing this situation are part of a society comprised of people who seem to have developed a volatile, irritable and divided or polarised personality which contributes to exaggeration of their generational, social and ideological differences, and which erodes the foundations of a shared morality and of the repository of mutual trust.

In other words, Europe, as a whole, seems to be mired in a state of crisis that extends to its economy, politics, society and culture; and this crisis of society and culture signifies a crisis of its public space where rational debate is replaced by uproar, disturbances and noisy confusion.

Although a degree of uproar is inevitable in any complex society and which, if not too severe, it is possible to live with, it should be remembered that disturbances can vary hugely in intensity and characteristics: they can be creative, mediocre or catastrophic. They pose what can be serious risks, including the possibility that the European project will never be completed because Europe will break up again. In fact, we have had seventy years since the

end of the Second World War to create it and we have not done enough: through lack of power, lack of willpower or just not wanting it enough.

The task of building Europe continues to be difficult but two factors work in its favour. The first is that *eppur si muove* - "and yet it moves": the resilience of Europe, its staying power and its flexibility let it move forward, at least insofar as it continues to live with ongoing problems without faltering. The second is that today we are in a better position to adequately interpret the situation, not least because we pay more attention and we are more conscious of the difficulties of the task facing us that we were some years ago.

In this short essay, I explore some of the factors propitious for the success of constructing Europe and, especially, its public space: to reinforce its identity by means of a culture of civil conversation, which includes the recurrent exercise of anamnesis (Voegelin, 1991), that is to say, the memory of experiences from the past combined with perception of experiences in the present. In other words, constructing Europe by means of the exercise not so much of willpower, in overcoming resistance, but of intelligence and moral feelings or affections, in order to be able to recognise what there is and to understand it. This involves overcoming both the tendency (and the temptation) of imagining that we create what we perceive, and that of responding to otherness with a hostility tinged with indifference.[1]

In this respect, I emphasise the importance of controlling the use and avoiding the abuse of binary interpretive frameworks such as "Europeanists versus nationalists", and I try to discern how the complex experiences of identity of a European *demos* and of the distinct national *demoi* could be articulated.

In order to do so, I propose that we consider the historical situation as if it were an open-ended drama with a range of possible outcomes (Hawthorn, 1991), and I suggest that we include within these outcomes the possible future that I call a kind of "Proustian project". Proust was an exponent of mythopoetic wisdom, and his testimony offers us a treasure trove of profound intuitions pertinent to society today. Of these, I choose to highlight two. First, the intuition that reality comes to us made up of a combination of "sensations and memories" (Proust, 1954 [1927]: 889). This means that (in this case) we can interpret the task of building Europe as a project that maintains a variety of dialogues and experiences, a dialectic of past and present agreements and disagreements, which, in turn, can provide the intellectual, moral and emotional bases for the motivations and strategies of citizens in favour of European construction.

Second, the intuition, which conflates with the first, that the moral impulse favourable to that task is based on rejection of a certain "indifference" ("indifference to the sufferings one causes... is *the* terrible and permanent form of cruelty": Proust, 1954 [1917]: 165). The indifference that involves the negation, from the outset, of otherness: the lack of curiosity, of concern, of empathy for others; not listening, not looking, recrimination, disdain, vitriol; which can escalate to stealing and killing... In other words, the negation *ab initio* of any

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[1]This work continues the exploration begun in Pérez-Díaz (2019).

friendly relationship, including the friendship which cements a political community together, and without enough of which there is simply no community.

**2. Complex identities and ambiguous nationalisms, and supranationalisms**

It is true to say that we tend to simplify things and, once a fight has begun, to simplify them even further. The good and the bad; the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. But if we are involved in a struggle that has already lasted for centuries, and will continue, it would be worth our while to rectify that tendency. We need to set aside a space for reflection away from the battlefield in order to grasp its many vicissitudes; a space in which to deal with our feelings and the feelings of those against whom we are fighting now but with whom we shall have to continue to coexist - in our own home and in the house next door, with walls of glass. This applies to the process of building not only Europe, with all its peoples and nations, but Spain as well. Although we have to understand that the concept of "nation" is complex: it is not a clear and distinct idea as Descartes would claim, but rather a confused perception as Leibniz describes. Confused but not false. A confusion that we must deal with or allow to blow up in our faces.

To clarify it, we should avoid "the degrading servitude of being wholly children of our time": a time of simplification and polarisation. Many of today's politicians and political observers (élites, the media and even the general public) usually attach great importance to the contrast between two major blocks which, *grosso modo*, are called "Europeanists or globalists", on the one hand, and "nationalists or populists", on the other. This contrast is usually discussed in the context of a historical account which illustrates the great dilemmas of being in favour or against a liberal society (in the broadest sense), an open society and a society faithful to the legacy of the Enlightenment. When stated in more specific political or institutional terms, the contrast is usually made between those who support immediate and increasing integration of the diverse countries of the European Union, and for a growing homogenisation between them, and those who emphasise the differences in identity of each country while demanding self-government and, therefore, full control of their own local affairs and corresponding policies.

The problem with this binary interpretive framework is that it applies to a dramatic, ongoing process in which we tend to find that the experiences (and strategies) of politicians and citizens of all kinds in this respect are complex and, to some extent, contradictory. They are contradictory to the point that citizens can experience feelings of identity that, almost simultaneously, are conflicting *and* complementary. The interpretations made by citizens of the process, and their support for some public policies and not others, are full of complexity and ambiguity which, sooner or later, are revealed as impossible to reduce to the simplicity of that binary schema.

It is useful to remember that data from Eurobarometer surveys on Europeans' feelings of identity show the importance of the phenomenon of dual identity. There are many who declare that they feel very or fairly close to Europe and to their own country *at the same time*. According to the figures of Eurobarometer 90.3 in 2018, for example, the percentages

usually range from 50% to 80% in each country, with variations by country: 58.6% in France and 76.8% in Germany; 63.5% in Spain and 53.6% in Italy; 76% in Sweden and Poland; with lower percentages in the United Kingdom, Greece and the Czech Republic, for example. In other words, a large majority of around two thirds of the European public feel that they belong to Europe *and* to their own country.[2]

That said, this dual identity is not usually experienced in any dramatic way. Although there are still numerous political actors and observers who consider that these identities are incompatible, many citizens experience the duality merely as a kind of peaceful co-existence (an emotional triangle, so to speak) in a "natural way", as if it were part of the "natural order of things".[3]

The naturalness with which Europeanism is compatible with national feelings is connected to the fact that people have become accustomed to living in the two spaces at the same time. On the one hand, for the best part of a century, there has been a European space of public debate as well as a framework of economic and social exchanges and legislative and judicial interactions of European dimensions. On the other, looking back, people perceive history to have been made by the self-assertiveness of each nation, and always within the context of deep-seated and intense rivalries and mutual influences between them. All the more so when those rivalries have tended to be mimetic, so that the country to emulate was a country to imitate rather than one with which to try and emphasise differences. That is why, in many respects, nations have come to resemble one another.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, instead of looking at the relatively simple responses to the surveys, if we examine the more complex evidence of the process of formation of the collective imaginaries, argumentations and feelings of European society, we find that the very term "nationalism", for example, both in common usage and in the use that has often been made of it by elites, has had not only a long[4] but an ambiguous history that varies from country to country.[5]

Consequently, we should take careful note of the meaning given to the words "nation, homeland, fatherland and country" by people everywhere and at all times. Because what experience tells us is that the same words can have different meanings while different

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[2]This said, it should not be forgotten that, in any case, and independent of their identification with Europe or not, the percentage of Europeans who identify (a lot or quite a lot) with their own country is at the higher level of around 90%.

[3]A naturalness, it should be said, which is not so different from what is expressed in their political support for the "families of the left and right" by a large part of the electorate; and which is linked to a tradition of ideological spaces, or homes, which have been in existence for a long time.

[4] Which authors like Greenfeld (2006) and, in another way, Gellner (1983) tend to confine to modernity.

[5] And thus, for example, reflecting partly past events and partly experiences still to be deciphered, most Spaniards today prefer to talk about "patriotism" than "nationalism", while the opposite is true of the Catalan independence movement (ASP Survey 19.061, with fieldwork in March, 2019).

words can have the same referent, depending on the context. It is our job to understand the meaning as well as the specific historical context of these words, and their evolution.

To give a much simplified example for the purpose of clarifying this point, French people today can and do think of themselves as globalists insofar as they are supporters of an open society. However, this probably does not detract from their ardent support for a cult of the nation which incorporates a large variety of symbolisms linked to profound, intense and enduring experiences. They combine, for example, the symbolism of the "Holy Land" and the France of Joan of Arc (as Kantorowicz reminds us, 2004 [1949]) with that of the France of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary fatherland; not to mention the symbolisms of the Sun King and Bonaparte, with their states and their armies sustaining and embodying their desire for grandeur, for being the centre of the world and the main foci of their history. These are symbolisms susceptible to being activated at any moment; as was obvious, for example, with the outpouring of emotion (even in the confused way normal among those who only half-remember their own history) at the time of the recent fire (in April, 2019) at the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. They are mutually reinforcing symbolisms around a cult to the France that is seen as a beacon of freedom and humanity, and even as "something more", "much more", "something heroic" and even, perhaps, as "salvation": here is "someone" prepared to take the lead on Europe, for the good of Europe but without neglecting their own (declared) advancement. And someone who, as a result, presents themselves as a reference point and an example of a nationalism (or patriotism) that is a hybrid between the cultural, the institutional and the natural, between the temporal and the eternal.

Of course, it is obvious that France is not alone in this endeavour. There are many European nations who, at one time or another, have seen themselves as bearers of extraordinary projects, as providential nations specially favoured by some divinity, each one employing languages with their own emphases and nuances. All of them have done so for reasons that seemed profound and plausible to many reasonable people of the time.[6] This is certainly true of the European nations in modern times which have seen themselves as great powers and leaders of some kind of empire: Spain, England, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Poland, Hungary... All of them expansionist, by land and by sea and with the help of God.

It might even be thought that the assertion of supra-nationalism by an integrated Europe prolongs rather than contradicts those urges and that it comes to be like a second derivative of the self-assertion or the will to power, or "to be" of many of the member countries. This self-assertion by Europe is linked to, and expressed through, nostalgia for a great geopolitical strategy, and its ambition to occupy one of the three, four or five key positions in the multipolar world order of the future.

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[6] Not, logically, to their critics; as can be seen from the stereotypes applied to Spain by its rival nations for centuries (Varela Ortega, 2019).

**3. Broadening the perspective in time and space; and the ironies of secularism**

We are looking at something which, disguised in secularist, modernist or post-modernist language, would be a *sui generis* transcendental religious project: that of a new "absolute spirit", more in the henotheistic, Hinduist terms of the Bhagavad Gita than in Hegelian terms and, of course, more in terms of the monotheism characteristic of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In other words, a project in terms of a whole range of supreme gods, but who have, in some way, learned (although "learned" is not perhaps the most apt word) to coexist and to get on with each other, offering human beings a range of religious alternatives, doctrines and life experiences as a result. Gods for creation, gods for maintenance, gods for destruction. New gods... as in China, for example, with its strange cultural confluence of (neo)Maoism-(neo)Confuciansim (and the apparent rhetorical confusion whereby socialism is the market and it is the family and it is the nation..., perhaps awaiting, as Confucius advised, a rectification of the names, which may happen some day). Alternatively, for example, the United States and Europe sometimes seem to demand to be worshipped (or at least revered) as incarnations of the Enlightenment and of Humanity.

To ignore this religious or crypto-religious background is to deny a substantial part of the culture that has pervaded an experience of politics that, generation after generation, has been indebted to a past "in which we were absent" and will be to a future "in which we shall be absent". A background, an attempt at permanence: confused but inevitable. Nevertheless, today, in an attempt to avoid them, society is offered the experience of modernity in more grounded, everyday language in terms of the distribution of power, wealth and status, and then a look ahead to a future with even more power, wealth and status for everyone almost equally (and the "almost" is important). Or else it is offered the more modest promise and proposal of succeeding by means of its "adaptation to change", thanks to the new communications media, the networks, the technological changes, education. It is always "state-of-the-art", always "looking to the future", in other words, into a vacuum: a vacuum supposedly overflowing with promise. And if the rhetoric of success does not chime with the experience of ordinary people, the option remains of resorting to the even more modest rhetoric of achieving a "more pleasant world" or (which is no longer to be scoffed at) a "habitable" one.

In one way or other, Western society has been re-enacting these rhetorical games with some success for a long time. Today's game is a variant of the rhetoric of the great European empires of the nineteenth century. Baroque rhetoric with its point - *sapere aude* [dare to be wise] and progress - and its counterpoint - the delusions of grandeur that led ultimately to the nightmare of the world wars and totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. In fact, they wanted to "have it both ways": with their parliamentary representation and their party politics; their rational-instrumental bureaucracies in amiable coexistence with the inevitable élites; their capitalism-cum-welfare state "moderated" by some unions (and "all going together" to the next war); their judicial independence and their broad cultural tolerance (and cultural creativity, and corresponding discomfiture) together with their attempts at a colonialism that ranged from civilising to predatory. These were the variations, we might say, between Victorian England, the France of the III Republic, the Germany of the II Reich

and the late Austro-Hungarian Empire. We could continue playing this game of mirrors between "nationalism" and "Europeanism" by projecting it retrospectively onto the entirety of a modern history that shows us how, when nations, and nationalists, cultivate aspirations of pre-eminence and leadership, it is easy for them to become *sui generis* Europeanists, globalists or imperialists.

We may still be playing the same game between nationalisms and Europeanisms, alternating between learning and forgetting the lesson that what is most important is not the political identity that we have (or exhibit) but what we do with it. In the same way that what is most important is how one lives a religious experience, not how one verbalises it.

Incidentally, this is not only a modern story nor one confined to Europe. These experiences use, and draw meaning from, accounts that stretch far back in time referring to imaginaries and institutions from classical antiquity (Alexander, Rome) and the Middle Ages (the Holy Roman Empire) which are rooted in the *lieux de mémoire* [sites of memory] that have configured the geographical space of Europe for centuries. Accounts that have accompanied the great strategies of those attempting to operate on a world scale by constructing complex networks of relationships and areas of influence.

Such accounts and discourses of justification should not be treated merely as a compendium of myth and confusion. They belong to a genre of mythopoetic knowledge of varying plausibility, and an attempt can be made to resolve the confusion. Obviously, such an attempt requires an effort of memory, a time for learning and waiting and experimenting; and a time for understanding, disagreeing, judging, apologising, forgiving. There are difficulties but these are not, however, much greater than the ones which confront the élites in *today*'s public space, who are trying to articulate their own accounts, weighing up their dramatic pasts and their present emergencies. The difficulties, for example, of a Germany which "wants and doesn't want" to be overall leader, and does not know whether it "should or should not" want to be, or in what way it could be; or a France that combines its pretensions to European leadership with concern for preserving its influence in Africa, its seat on the United Nations Security Council, and its ranking as a nuclear power. And neither of these two leading nations know quite how to collaborate with each other.

In any case, I insist that this is not simply a European phenomenon. There are many records of analogous ambiguities that can be observed outside Europe. In Russian tradition, for example, in both its Slavophile and Westernizer or Europeanist variants, are two key references from Dostoyevsky's speech in tribute to Pushkin, almost 150 years ago (echoing a much earlier history). It is a speech that (understands but) maintains that the division between Slavophiles and Westernizers was a grave mistake. A mistake that had to be remedied not by denying Russia (and subsuming it into Europe) but, on the contrary, by realising it fully (Dostoyevsky, 1964 [1880]: 1,444ff.).[7]

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[7]A mistake which was perhaps inevitable but which, above all, had to be remedied, and which was about to be remedied even with the Petrine reforms, and in spite of the nihilistic tendencies of a later era.

In its own way (though not of the same literary quality), something similar occurs with the current nationalism of President Trump's *America First* policy, which is an attempt to consolidate a preeminent position on the world stage. It can be interpreted as a variant of a traditional position in United States politics: a pretension to hegemony throughout the Americas almost from the very beginning, and its globalist ambitions throughout the greater part of the last 200 years; and bear in mind that, even from the opposing, more *liberal* position, something analogous exists in its use of the more politically correct term "prolonging the American century" (Nye, 2015). And we know that all of this incorporates within it the echo of the invocation to the "city upon the hill" of the founding fathers of New England, some four centuries ago, with their combination of excellent intentions and mixed feelings of humility and pride, of faith and self-assertion, typical of "chosen peoples".

Whether we look east or west, we find variants of this vision of an indispensable nation, a nation chosen to be guarantor of the world order - which are not that different from the vision of ancient China as the centre and guarantor of universal harmony. With a sacred aura, they all promote a leadership project *urbi et orbi*: divine nations and nation-continents. They are all the bearers of eschatological projects, close to the supreme gods, divine or quasi-divine beings, although they are perhaps "vulnerable gods" (Pérez-Díaz, 2013).

In other words, although the dividing lines between nations and empires, or large-scale political entities, have been and continue to be blurred and porous, or alternatively, interlinked and interwoven, this usually coincides with them all sharing the pretension of having a transcendent dimension. It is an irony of history that, beneath all their ostensibly secularist languages, and regardless of the claim by some authors (Greenfeld, 2006) that secularism is consubstantial with, and a defining characteristic of, nationalism, the fact is that the associations persist between nationalisms and some form of religion that invokes some kind of immortality. This may be, for example, by belonging to a fatherland that looks back and also forward to indefinite/infinite times in the past and in the future. This fatherland embodies a supreme being that, as such, demands (a minor detail...) a willingness to die for it: some as combatants in the trenches, others under bombs in the rear. It is a fatherland rooted in a land whose ownership is justified because it "has belonged to us generation after generation, forever and ever"; a fatherland that is perhaps where the circle of "gods and men, earth and sky" will meet.

For that reason, we need to recognise and understand how, although cloaked in a secularist aura and purporting to be beacons of reason, freedom and justice, western countries (as such, or subsumed into Europe) that are always advancing, always looking to the future, always so busy and obsessed with their everyday activities, find that, knowingly or not, wanting to or not, they have inherited and are prolonging and reproducing a very ancient (oriental, Roman, Egyptian, Mesopotamian...) and very modern urge for domination combined with a religious compulsion as intense as it is diffuse, that usually includes the (praiseworthy) intention of imposing order on the world.

Although it must be said that with order comes disorder. One of the paradoxical attractions of the current situation is that it is becoming increasingly clear that realisation of the project to bring order to the world requires the linking of two disorders: that of the world in general with that of the "house in disorder" of each nation. This makes the situation as interesting as it is difficult to understand and to manage. It requires broadly-based cultural work that is still to be carried out.

**4. Outlining a kind of Proustian project for Europe**

Progress will be made in clarifying the confused situation in which we (as Europeans and also members of a nation) find ourselves if, by trying to better understand what we truly want and can do, we look more carefully at *what we already are* as the result of what we have made of ourselves on the very long and dramatic path beginning much *before* the end of the Second World War, the French Revolution, the American War of Independence (or, for Spaniards, the democratic transition). For that, we must get right how and what we remember, and each one of us, each country, must begin with ourselves. By doing so, we must realise that, although we have always lived *with each other*, sometimes in peace and sometimes at war, each nation (and/or supra-nation, as the case may be) can only affirm its identity if it accepts its responsibility. Responsibility, that is, for the many acts which, over time, have contributed so much to making it what it is (and to making other nations what they are).

We should start by focussing on each case, not by making premature generalisations.[8] We need to understand (identify with, distance ourselves from, look again from another angle, listen carefully to ourselves...) what the experience of "being ourselves" means for those groups of agents that, as a whole, we usually call nations. They should not be seen in any arbitrary way, as the result of the usual plebiscite (as Renan does) or, in other words, of an act of "sovereign" decision-making (to be repeated on a daily basis? reducing the people or nation of a moment earlier to the rank of "non-sovereign"?). Neither should nations be seen as mere incarnations of projects with a view to the future, always ready for an update each and every day without respite: a future which is, by definition, incomprehensible because it cannot be foretold. And neither as nations that are not even "seen" but only "glimpsed", because they are imagined as reflections of a wish to become like each other. This is what happens when one aspires to "being like Europe" as the solution to the enigma of who we are.

What we need to do is an act of anamnesis, which is both simple and complex. It is simple insofar as it is an exercise of memory that helps us to understand recent occurrences, and how to continue existing and not self-destruct. There is also a more complex variant of

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[8] Perhaps based on simple interpretive frameworks chosen in order to reduce the cognitive costs of the search and, along the way, save ourselves the anguish of struggling blindly with matters that are too complex. These include, for example, dealing with the other twenty or so countries of the European community, and comparing them with the remaining one hundred and more countries, not to mention the many thousands of ethnic groups in the world, with their own languages, cultures and personalities. Comparisons that can, of course, be useful and complement and illuminate ongoing interpretations.

memory: a sort of Proustian project of "remembrance of things past". This can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct a space for friendship and understanding that is perhaps what we have always been searching for, based on recurring interactions and interests, landscapes, combined memories and sensations (Arnheim, 1992: 36), times of festivity and times of grief, convergences and divergences. All of these are shaping experience of a shared reality, in the form of a continuous present, which endures.

In this sense, the making of Europe does not require a voluntarist project ("More Europe!") and/or a nominalist one ("Europe is what *we decide to call* Europe"), as many politicians tend to imagine (by means of a highly elaborated constitutional text, innumerable political commissions, a major information and propaganda campaign, and the ensuing appeal to show up to vote or demonstrate in the streets). Making Europe (and something analogous can be applied to the nations which make it up) requires, above all, a project based on a Proustian kind of narrative: as an opportunity for the experience of recovering and incorporating past time, and defining a present that continues to be just over the horizon. At some point in his life, Proust concentrated on remembering, on re-crossing the River Lethe, on forgetting, on returning to the present, going back to the past and returning once again. His purpose was to relive, in a more profound way and with a more rational, more balanced sense of hope and despair, his experiences and the experiences of others - the significant others - whom he looked upon with friendship, comprehension and compassion, and which therefore, as he would say, obviated cruelty and indifference. Going one step further, it suggests that all this is how Proust manages to evoke, or how he captures and recreates, landscapes, people and feelings, flavours and sounds in the form of beauty, goodness and truth... all transcendental things. It is at this point, surely, that the irony of secularism becomes apparent to us: secularism cannot survive alone, and therefore it conjures up a transcendental dimension in the very attempt at avoiding its presence.

Taking the metaphor as a reference point, tying together these intersecting friendships that share memories and ongoing feelings, being present at, and being part of, the building of Europe as a fabric of nations and of the agents rooted more or less within them, involves an internal dialogue within each country and a dialogue with other countries (and other parts of the world) which are, ultimately, tentative and complex. In such a situation, it is logical to expect high levels of bipolarity and the blurring of everyone's judgement - and that, for example, the majority of citizens associate the words "nation" and "homeland" with feelings that, while sometimes easy and spontaneous and sometimes difficult to interpret, are so important that they cannot, nor do they believe that they should, avoid them. It is even possible that we are facing one of those difficult-to-solve situations that Ernest Gellner referred to in what was his last book (when he used the evocative expression "the Habsburg dilemma": Gellner, 1998: 190). This refers to experiencing historical reality in full awareness of the two extremes of a counterposition that we feel is fundamental - and with the two doubts that, firstly, there is no solution and, secondly, that perhaps "over time" the counterposition will not prove as fundamental as it appears now.

What is needed to carry out this Proustian project in the Europe of today as a kind of *long-term indirect grand strategy*? To understand who we are and how we have arrived at where

we are, and what we want, and whom we meet on the journey and what they are like? And to do so in an increasingly complex situation, that seems to change in rhythm and direction in uncontrollable ways? What is needed is the construction of a conversation space more open to the sky (already a more stormy sky, at times made blustery with stronger winds) than Proust's refuge on the Boulevard Haussman. A space in which every kind of social and political agent commits to a set of simultaneous multiple games that include diverse, high-risk debates extended over time.

For this to occur, it is essential to have a climate of civility that promotes a coexistence defined as much by words and gestures as by acts. Acts such as votes, civic actions and a variety of political rituals. Not words traded as insults but as conversations between people of partially differing, partially converging views. This presupposes that they share enough premises and criteria to be able to understand what their opponents are saying, at the very least. And it is even better if they come to understand what *they want to say* to them, assuming that they try and tell - and tell themselves - some form of the truth. (In other words, applying the "principle of charity", as some contemporary philosophers recommend: Davidson, 1984.)

In turn, these conversations and common premises require that the agents not only have time available and information but also, and above all, that they have judgement and character - that they share some classical intellectual and moral virtues. These include strength and fortitude in order to remain clear-headed and confront the critical risks and reality of violence; also, the habits and dispositions that encourage reasoning, involving common sense, justice and prudence, and the necessary care when dealing with complex problems, paying attention to the circumstances, details and nuances.

Likewise, the cultivation of such virtues requires a number of initial parallel processes on a national and a European scale. I can only refer to them briefly, with a (practical) reference to three socio-cultural factors of civic conversation: the public space, civil society and education.

I would emphasise, firstly, the importance of reconstructing the political community as a community of friendship, which is expressed in and through *a continuous conversation in the public space*. With due caution, however, that there should be no room for a political class that considers society, *de facto*, as a society to be dominated under the guise of guiding it or leading it. It is for that very reason that a society continues to be divided: by taking political disagreements to extremes until they become the cause for displays of contempt, deceit and hostility between some social segments and others. If this is how politicians understand democracy, it is time for them to rectify and use some other name to define it (such as "oligarchy" or "demagogy", for example). In any case, if they do understand it in this way, it is obvious that their contribution to a Proustian project would be negative: the "remembrance of things past" would become little more than a catalogue of grudges.

Secondly, there is the importance of bolstering *coexistence in relatively restricted circles of sociability* such as, for example, the family and civil society. These, in adequate conditions, can offer a crucial opportunity - probably the most important one in the long term - to turn the experience of conversation into a *habit,* and in this way, to build up reserves of wisdom, civic decency and self-confidence. Of course, it is possible that the opposite will occur, and a clientelist society or associations which promote their own identity or particular interest over and above any form of the common good, will emerge instead.

Lastly, there are the benefits of *a good education*. However, we must keep in mind that merely expanding today's educational experience (more years in school, more homework at home, more learning for learning's sake...) is not sufficient. This is because education today is not conducive to creating a climate of civility, and usually only transmits partial, cursory and decontextualised information. There is not much of the kind of education which fosters the ability to assess and develop arguments or to apply a measured judgement to things (as William Cory, master at Eton, desired: Oakeshott, 1991: 491), both of which are key to political prudence and, incidentally, to the ability to listen. Not to mince words, this lack reflects the quality of elite education itself which, in turn, reflects the aggressive bias inherent in the functioning of many of their institutions.

All this attests to what may be an overly arduous task; but, at least, there are good examples and good memories to be had from it. Let them be testimony to the possibility of realising Proustian projects and dreams.

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