EUROPE, A MAELSTRÖM AND A LEAP OF FAITH

IN A CRISIS OF GROWING COMPLEXITY, HOW TO DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS AND RE-ASCEND

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ASP Research Paper 124(b)/2021

Research Papers

ASP Analistas Socio-Políticos

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This essay has been written within the framework of the Funcas Europa Project. Translated from Spanish by Patricia Newey.

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ASP Research Papers

Depósito legal: M-6126-1994
ISSN: 1134 - 6116

The aim of this essay is to explore some aspects of the contrast between the current (massive) crisis in Europe and in Spain, and the (limited) strategic capacity of their political communities to deal with it. I approach the issue from a sociocultural perspective that emphasises the nature of the crisis as one of open drama, and the feeling within these communities of being overwhelmed by the gravity and urgency of their problems, as well as some aspects of the sense and moral dimension of their response. I also highlight the role that could be played by the citizens who make up civil society - the ordinary people - in the handling of the crisis. I employ a literary figure, that of the Maelström, to illustrate my argument and I make general use of a variety of materials and references from the social sciences, narratives, art, history, moral philosophy, statistics, personal testimonies, newspaper articles, popular culture as well as some brief digressions for the purpose of enlarging the spatial and temporal, and intellectual, framework of the discussion.

This work forms part of a series of essays on Europe in which I have focused my attention on other sociocultural factors such as the sense of limits, the role of memory in reinforcing feelings of identity, the willingness to commit to a variety of strategic games, and caution when it comes to dealing with feelings of mutual distrust (Pérez-Díaz, 2020a and 2020b).

1. Europe, its capacity for agency and the resilience of its nation-states

The European construction as a narrative and as a lived experience

In view of the three-quarters of a century that has gone by since the end of the Second World War, it seems clear that moving forward with the construction of Europe while reducing its citizens to a secondary role (which comprises little more than being mobilised to participate in one referendum after another, accepting regulations, or receiving aid) reduces the capacity for agency of Europe as a political community. It threatens to convert the ironic comment of Eric Voegelin (in his intellectual autobiography; 1989: 107) about the "famous Europe that never existed" into a kind of prophecy: "Europe as the undefined promise that never comes to be realised". Its realisation would require a strengthening of purpose, widespread cooperation and a change of direction.

Numerous cultural and institutional factors have influenced and continue to influence negatively this process of European construction with reduced civic participation. A long history of intra-European conflicts, exacerbated in the first half of the twentieth century, of partisan struggles, economic competition and colonial expansion led to increased emphasis on the nomocratic dimension of the European political system or, that is, on the legal system and the game rules, while focusing less on its participative dimension.

Moreover, the deficit of agency has been present from the outset. European nation-states embarked upon the adventure of a united Europe with a reduced capacity for agency, broken as they were from the recent war, and in need of external defence and support. They pursued their adventure in an ambivalent manner. They wanted a Europe (and a United States) that would protect them, while reserving for themselves a substantial part of their sovereignty. As a result, their political classes have since exercised their leadership by upholding this bi-polar approach, reflected in a series of performative contradictions whereby, on the one hand, they have promoted the European public space with Europeanist rhetoric whilst, on the other, they have fragmented it with actions aimed, above all, at the national interest (Pérez-Díaz, 1997).

Sadly, such rhetoric has consequences. If the symbolism diverges from the baseline reality, the latter is weakened. Therefore appealing to the European collective identity based on narratives of memories and projects is superficial when these are no more than mantras and theories, and when they do not succeed in becoming part of people's experiences and living culture. The conversion can be difficult

and laborious because the evocation of memories is, at times, painful and demands a considerable moral and emotional effort; and because it is not easy to articulate a common project for countries that are economically, socially and culturally so diverse without addressing the interconnections of their many interests and passions.

It may seem paradoxical but Europeanist rhetoric is even less persuasive when it occurs within a binary interpretative framework that dominates the public space such as that of Europeanists *versus* nationalists. The reason for this is that the contrast tends to cause confusion, firstly, because the opponents misrepresent their positions: in fact, not for a moment do the Europeanists lose sight of their national interest, and neither do the nationalists have the slightest interest in leaving Europe. Secondly, and more importantly, because that binary framework constitutes a source of mystification since it conceals the basic agreement between Europeanists and nationalists about their common roots and the very significance of their confrontation. That significance is one of asserting different versions of a particular vision of politics: politics as the ground over which grand strategies are deployed in order to assert the will to power, and the domination of some over others (regions, parties, classes, ethnic or cultural communities, etc.); all of which challenges radically the very existence of a political community that encompasses us all.[1]

The aim of constructing Europe as a political community, a *demos*, with a strategic capacity, involves overcoming those obstacles by developing the cognitive, moral and emotional abilities of European politicians and citizens. This would reinforce in them the impulse for collective action and a realistic understanding of their situation, and also their choice of direction. (Impulse and a realistic sense of limits can be translated, in figurative language, into the impulse to fly and caution, not only to come in to land safely [Pérez-Díaz, 2020a] but to guide the flight.)

An open drama, and a drift?

Over the last decade, Europe, in general, and a number of European countries like Spain, in particular, have been experiencing a particularly deep and complex crisis. This crisis does not form part of an inevitable tendency. It is a drama open to various possible outcomes according to how it is perceived and evaluated by the relevant agents, and what they do or fail to do as a result, depending on their actions and their attitudes.

Unfortunately, the mindset of many Europeans is that they feel bewildered and overwhelmed by the turn of events (the economic crisis, the pandemic), and the outlook has been getting worse. It is as if the performance in the public sphere had suddenly changed. What had been advertised as a scene from "The End of History", the definitive triumph of the Enlightenment and Modernity, which seemed to be swelling up to the crescendo of the finale of the Ninth Symphony and its "Ode to Joy" (the anthem of Europe), has yielded to a scene from the final act of "Swan Lake". With a very different *tempo*. Passing from the vigour of Beethoven to the melancholy of Tchaikovsky, the beloved one, who has metamorphosed into the white swan, vanishes. And with her, is it conceivable to imagine that the "myth of Europe" is also vanishing? As a committed and critical observer, Tony Judt (1996: 140) had already speculated was about to happen to the founding myth of Europe even earlier?

What is quite clear is that, today, the climate of triumph has disappeared to be replaced by one that looks, to many, to be pushing us to the brink of survival. Perhaps we had become accustomed to dealing with the world of European politics, economics, society and culture as if the institutional systems and the stories that shaped them fitted together - or at least enough so that they would not break apart, but hold together sufficiently well to be able to move forward. But events have now taken a disquieting turn.

[1] I explore this subject in my essay "Europa y el triunfo de la paz sobre la guerra" (Pérez-Díaz, 2021, in press).

There is growing doubt as to whether this modern world of ours, Europe included, is not headed for a major aberration: one of distorted capitalism, polarised and partitocratic democracy, a fragmented and atomised society and a confused and superficial culture. And most urgent is the question as to whether, if the situation deteriorates further, this aberration might not lead to domination by self-centred elites (and counter-élites) who would be playing the double game of mutual hostility and complicity among themselves. They would probably go astray within a maze of conflicts and compromises: always aiming to control a public space that is, on the face of it, erratic and full of distortions which, in turn, makes it impossible for them to be controlled by citizens, thus facilitating the development of the oligarchic and demagogic drift in modern politics.

Concerning **Brexit**

Even if we try not to over-dramatise the situation and maintain an attitude of reasonable doubt, (or "pragmatic optimism"), it cannot be denied that the current crisis has caught us by surprise at a time when Europe, as a collective agency, is still in the process of creation. It is not sufficiently advanced as to be able to spearhead a response to this crisis. It can certainly influence the course of events but not enough to suggest the existence of a long-term, coordinated grand strategy. It only exerts influence to a limited degree and as if from a distance; and it mainly indulges in reminding each nation-state that it should put its own house in order. Under current conditions, this reminder is certainly important but it highlights the fact that the nation-state continues to be the driving force behind solutions to the health, economic, social, political and cultural challenges exacerbated by the current crisis.

To some observers, Brexit offers an unparalleled opportunity to advance towards a more integrated Europe. They assume that the United Kingdom impeded realisation of the dream of a united Europe and that now, no longer encumbered by it, Europe will integrate sooner and better. However, this is a somewhat illusory supposition if we examine not only the centuries of wars out of which the Europe of today has been forged - largely because of them and configured by them - but also the story of Europe in more recent decades. It is conceivable that the example of Brexit may, in fact, reinforce the tendency towards autonomy of the member countries. What is clear is that, at least until now, for the majority of Europeans, the Europeanist dream has only served as little more than entertainment for their leisure hours rather than as an aspiration to be made reality.

It is not, however, a dream that will become reality any time soon for several reasons, some of them mentioned above, and some more powerful than others. Some derive from the differences in political ideologies (narratives, gestures, discourses) between nationalists-above-all and Europeanists-above-all, although these differences should not be over-stated. This is because experience suggests that the populisms and nationalisms of left and right, the social democrats, the conservatives and the liberals all tend, in their own way, to be patriots, and also that they are obsessed with gaining power and holding on to it; which implies the permanence of the homeland that they wish to govern. This also applies to extremist parties: extreme but not to the extent that they will object to find a niche for themselves in whatever coalition government is in power. In fact, almost all of them adapt to "what is on offer": a Europe at the centre of which is a semi-functioning European Union, and the hope that everything will continue to move ahead without forcing the pace.

In this context, neither does it seem likely that the European project will benefit from any kind of post-nationalist discourse on the part of left-wing or right-wing globalists in their various manifestations; nor that of the international environmentalists; nor that of those "fellow travellers" - China and Russia- who both support "socialist market" economies and authoritarian democracies, with their respective establishments in tight control of the politics, the economics and the media; and lastly, nor that of the

futurists, fascinated by cutting-edge technology and innovation and transfixed by the expectation of a permanent revolution that will lead to continuous human and post-human transformation

In reality, a compelling reason in favour of the (*de facto*) primacy of the nation-state derives from the essential fact that, for many centuries (maybe fifteen, five, or only two), and still today, in spite of ongoing globalisation and European integration, the differences between European nation-states continue to be *lived* by the immense majority of their citizens (including the globalists, at least on a daily basis) as determining factors. As a result, even the Europeanists feel obliged to talk in terms of a Europe of partner nations, who are concerned for and help each other.

Citizens but not quite "sovereigns"

This language couched in national terms sounds all the more plausible when citizens feel that that is just what they are, "citizens": but not so much citizens of the world and subjects of "human rights" as, above all, citizens of "their" country. It is "their" country because they feel that they are "sovereign over it". They are the subjects not only of rights but also of duties and, in particular, with powers. They are not only citizens insofar as laws are applied to them but insofar as they have (or believe that they have) the power (and the responsibility) to make those laws. And their politicians are, or seem to be, approachable by, and responsible to, the public (Olsen, 2019): politicians whose names are recognisable and who seem to be relatively close at hand.

In contrast, insofar as they are European citizens, people barely understand the politicians and civil servants who hold power in the European Union and nor do they communicate with them; in fact, they do not usually even share the same language. What is lacking is a space for dialogue, because if citizens only half understand the problems of their own country, they understand those of Europe even less.

And this is especially true when the difficulties of communicating with European politicians are compounded by the difficulty with which European citizens have in communicating directly among themselves. As tourists, or as visitors for whatever reason, they exchange smiles and stock phrases of greeting and farewell, making use of the services provided, but they speak a different language and they use different gestures. They have trust in their fellow European citizens to some extent but it depends about what; and, faced by any misunderstanding, they are quick to sense or suspect others' reticence. Their entire landscape, with sites of remembrance of famous battles (and their literature and their stock phrases) is replete with reminders that can and do rekindle their reservations.

Moreover, the politicians themselves make it difficult for their own citizens because they do not talk to them clearly (and sometimes not at all) about European issues. They obsessively focus public debate on local issues; and, over any little thing, they are quick to allege conflicts of interest, opinion or identity between people, to fan attitudes of distrust.

Strange to relate, when local politicians turn into European politicians, working on a continental scale, they are transformed. They are perceived to be far away. They are "off to Flanders", as Spaniards used to say in the time of the Habsburgs. Nothing more is heard of them. They earn more money and acquire an air of importance. And in time, they fade from the popular imagination to become virtually irrelevant. It even seems, at times, as if they themselves get bored reciting a European homily. Without wishing to, they encourage the indifference of their own citizens towards Europe except insofar as local interests are concerned. And this has occurred from the very beginning which, for Spain, was 35 years ago (when she joined the European Communities in 1986). All this suggests a climate of easy but superficial Europeanist consensus around the symbolism and reality of the European *polis*, that European political rituals seem to turn into a cult object for the initiated.

Against the background of such experiences, there has been a tendency for the citizens of each country to adopt an attitude that combines ignorance with indifference concerning the political problems of other European countries. Incidentally, this mutual indifference between countries is congruent with the general orientation of the cultural environment, more in accord with the principle of "each to their own" and, as for the common good, "we'll see". The common good would be "too complicated". They end up behaving as if there were some remote gods who should know what is going on but fail to make it clear and, when all is finally revealed, it is to find out that each country has "its own" common good and the rest can go it alone.

And now... reconstructing the constellation of nation-states?

So the United Kingdom has gone; but, apparently, it is not so that we shall now sing the "Ode to Joy" of Schiller and Beethoven "in unison" but so that each of us can do our own thing, even though we all share the same rhetoric of "there must be coordination". If we are set on achieving this coordination, rather than starting with all twenty-something nation-states, we could start with a simplified schema of five vectors: three subsets of relatively similar countries and two quasi-protagonists.

We have the new Hanseatic League made up of the Netherlands, Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, with its message of prudent governance and social and economic policies that seem akin to those of Germany. It does not, however, accord with what the Latin Mediterranean countries do, or seem to do, or seem to want to do. The former group tends to refer to the latter with a mixture of sympathy and indifference, tact and disdain, compassion and educational animus. These Latin Mediterranean countries are obviously very different to each other and, apart from their complaints being contagious, they tend to do little together. Each one of them (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece) has an amazing but remote history. For its part, the Visegrad group, made up of Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, seems to share certain common obsessions and a certain distance from everyone else, as the result of a singular history and geopolitical location, having endured two totalitarian experiences and survived them while trying to remain true to themselves (Laignel-Lavastine, 2005).

Which brings us to the purported leaders of the EU, France and Germany, who are not fulfilling their roles. In reality, they have almost never shown much confidence in each other: are they really sure that they want to lead all the other countries, or just accompany them or guide them from behind like good shepherds towards... where? They still do not know themselves (even after some seventy years). They have enough to do organising the interminable rounds of conferences and declarations and admonitions; not to mention the rumblings (in France) of the "gilets jaunes", the setting up and taking down of cordons sanitaires, and the expressions of pity for immigrants before they are relegated to the inevitable slums. Perhaps with a French "I want to but I can't" and a German "I can but I don't want to".

Surveying the rest of the world, élites and ordinary citizens have little more than a rudimentary idea of how Europe can affirm either its autonomy by standing up to the United States or its co-leadership by working with them, when not even the USA knows what it wants. This has become apparent, not once or twice but *ad nauseam*, in the succession of crises and wars in the huge area that unites Europe, Asia and Africa between the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia over the last three or four decades: the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Palestine and Israel, etc. (not to mention other regions of the world); and under quite different American presidents (Clinton, the two Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump...). And in the case of Iran, the same game of chess is still being played over and over again just as it has been for over half a century, alternating carrots with sticks: a triumph of form over substance with poor results.

Now, with the pandemic, no longer "out there" on the horizon but "over here" on our doorstep, initial reactions to the situation suggest that Europe, although it is aware of the opportunity to take a joint lead in the task of health coordination and vital economic support, has still not overcome a profound inhibition and a deep-rooted timidity towards encouraging us Europeans to feel ourselves united and to act in concert when facing a crucial test in an extreme situation, the outcome of which is still unknown.

2. Spain, a dramatic trajectory – and a brief *excursus*

But if the nation-states are resilient they are also fragile. If we examine the case of Spain, the current situation would appear to reflect a mix of order and disorder at a time when the disorderliness is becoming more obvious and more dangerous as a result of the pandemic. Faced with this, the initial reaction of the most influential spheres and a large part of society has been the defensive reflex of denying reality and clinging to routine: to the mantras of "it'll go away" and "it's not that bad", bordering on a whimsical "maybe yes, maybe no". This recourse to routine is barely concealed behind a mixture of improvised management and calculated language about grand strategies of "we'll control the virus", "we'll defeat it" and so forth. We have gone from the magical solution of "the pandemic will go away by itself" (and from the inexplicable way in which it arrived) to "it will go away" by casting the right spell.

In addition, the rhetoric tries to hide the "minor detail" that this experience is going to leave us with in the aftermath: the feeling that, from now on, humanity (in other words, us) will have to live with the lasting possibility of another pandemic occurring, just like this one, suddenly and without warning. The ruling classes scarcely mention this possibility but ordinary people suspect it and discuss it in undertones. Indeed, a recent survey recorded the fact that 64.5% of interviewees consider it to be very or quite probable that there will be another pandemic within the next ten years.[2] It has caused tens of thousands of deaths (probably over 85,000 in Spain in barely a year); and its effects are combining with those of both a serious economic crisis with multiple ramifications and a socio-cultural crisis that we are still barely aware of, to create an extremely difficult situation.

It is useful to place this moment within the broader historical context. I do not propose to evaluate the Spanish experience over the last century, with its ostensible political history and its economic and socio-cultural intra-history. It is enough to remember that, after some dramatic events (the crisis of 1898, the Semana Trágica [the Tragic Week] of 1909, and the assassinations of Prime Ministers Cánovas and Canalejas in 1897 and 1912, Dato some time later...) that Spain avoided fighting in the First World War; but then grappled with the General Strike of 1917, the disaster of Annual, Morocco, in 1921 and the coup d'état by Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923. Following these came the setbacks of the Second Republic, culminating in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the subsequent Francoist authoritarian bureaucratic regime. This led ultimately to what we know as the democratic transition. It was a transition made possible by the fact that, beneath all that turmoil, the slow, complex and contradictory development of a civil society had been taking place, mainly in relation to markets and a plural associative fabric but with substantial progress in the rule of law which, in turn, allowed the political mutation towards a liberal democracy.[3]

The transition has had its moments of light and darkness, with better phases alternating with worse ones in times of order and disorder. It has enabled life to go on in spite of deep social and political divisions: an economy enjoying almost continuous growth but clearly below its potential (with an unemployment rate repeatedly in two figures); a public space of uneven quality, somewhat noisy and

[2] *ASP Survey 20.064.* Online survey on a representative sample of the Spanish population aged between 18 and 75; fieldwork 19th-22nd November 2020; sample size: 1,254.

[3] A full discussion of this question can be found in Pérez-Díaz (1993).

tedious; and a society based on mutual tolerance, that has settled into a state of mediocrity and the discomfiture that comes from knowing that at some critical junctures it has been put to the test and failed (Pérez-Díaz, 1996).

Memories of the past have been a decisive cultural factor in making society very appreciative of the benefits of even its current predicament. These are far from inconsiderable if compared with the Civil War and the post-war period. They are not memories to be found in books or political or academic declarations but buried memories that yet live on; thus the current situation can be compared with its potential alternatives: an authoritarian or totalitarian country, or in the throes of becoming one, or an impoverished and backward country.

The fact is, in recent years, Spain has been engaged in preventing the break-up of the country as a result of Catalonia's demand for independence. If this separation were to take place, it is not difficult to imagine how it might affect other areas of Spain immediately afterwards. It has also been concerned with avoiding or minimising the risks of the roller-coaster of ups and downs in the world economy. Its political leaders have been diligent in adjusting to what they were being told to do on questions of basic economics by those whom we might colloquially call "their elders and betters" - the leaders of the major countries of Europe and international organisms. Letting themselves get carried away. Behaving "as if" they were, in fact, governing and leading the country towards...? Towards a relatively satisfied, fairly tolerant society with the possibility of and - according to the optimists - ready to take top spots in the international rankings of health and education systems (at least until achieving "the best educated generation in Spain's history"); not to mention mass sun-and-beach tourism, and various services. In the meantime, they have been dismissing the opposite view as overly pessimistic.

It cannot be denied that the arguments of these (whom I call) pragmatic optimists are based on a very reasonable premise. In the last forty years there has been much good news. This includes a reduction in physical violence and other crimes, improved nutrition and a considerably higher life expectancy than half-a-century ago (the average in Spain has risen from 71.4 years in 1965-70 to 83 years today). Good news for the preservation of mankind, you might say, but not so good for its propagation because the birth rate has gone down dramatically. Likewise, there have been innumerable signs of the endurance, flexibility and ingenuity of families and villages and associations working together and moving forward; a sense of freedom; examples of the vibrancy of basic emotions. There is probably also a greater intellectual capacity for the information processing required for producing objects, carrying out transactions, gaining access to social and economic services and using means of transport: the many and varied basic everyday activities.

However, the final assessment must depend on the moral criterion and the standard that we require.

A brief excursus on the cultural background of the crisis, and the culture of magnanimity

Our judgement on the (relative) drift or loss of direction of Spain will be more or less critical according to our moral standard and our value criterion of what we should consider to be the common good. There are many and diverse points of view in this respect. Such diversity may be an obstacle to analysis but need not be so. It may be an obstacle because it encourages confrontation that is confusing; on the other hand, it may encourage conversation which is enlightening. It is true to say that even wildly differing points of view can be drawn a little closer together as the result of experience combined with conversation, and sometimes in surprising ways.

Throughout Western history, we find not only myriad debates but also unusual and profound rapprochements which offer ways of engaging in a conversation (which go beyond the far too common schema today of "for or against the Enlightenment"). To take two extremes, let's consider, for

example, the visions of European society that can inspire a Nietzsche or a St. Francis of Assisi. To some extent, they both share a culture of great achievements. In Nietzsche, we find the desire for power (to exercise over his neighbour), and in St. Francis, humble love (and care for, or service to, his neighbour). Nothing could be so apparently contradictory, especially if we take the version of Nietzsche himself in his *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche, 1979 [1888]) or in his *The Antichrist* (Nietzsche, 1968 [1888]). And yet, the contrast has its counterpoint. From a dynamic, historical perspective, that contrast may be subsumed within a debate in which affinities emerge between opposites: affinities which, in this case, relate to a certain standard.

Nietzsche, the militant atheist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Francis of Assisi, saint of the thirteenth century, have very different profiles but also some common features. These include, for example, explicit, or implicit, praise of the virtue of magnanimity. This, in Nietzsche's case, is bound up with a Promethean feeling of a desire for power linked to an outwardly "more than human" objective (which could, in reality, be "simply human"). In St. Francis' case, it is tied to a profound, humble and loving feeling, a wish for holiness, i.e. on a different level of intensity of life experience and excellence. We should remember some of the small symbolic details that bring them together. They were both creators, with their vertical drive: that of Nietzsche as an "ascensional poet", in Bachelard's words (1943), and that of St. Francis, conversing with his Brother Sun; *both* of them living at odds with a culture of resentment. And the symbolism of the care of living creatures, recalling how Nietzsche went mad with distress in Turin, embracing a horse that had been flogged, and St. Francis walked through Gubbio in the company of a docile wolf.

It is true that, as they are portrayed in their respective legends, their basic attitudes are radically different, but one can infer a number of possibilities. Confrontation is one, of course, but also the affinity that I have just mentioned (those "small details" of the horse and the wolf), and that of a kind of transition between one referent and another. After all, it was precisely a moral sense of magnanimity that led Ignatius of Loyola to turn away from reading books of knight errantry and prepare himself for reading the lives of the saints. This set him on a different path, but one that was not radically dissimilar to chivalrous heroism. It was also the path chosen by our "national hero", Don Quixote - a path chosen by him not because he was mad but because he was a hero - who was ready to protect the weak, liberate serfs and adolescents tied to trees, and widows and orphans.

In order to discuss standards (and criteria) as applied to the public arena, we can explore several scenarios that are fairly plausible given the historical conditions. The criterion that I propose (and the reader is welcome to back on their own proposal) is one of a society rooted in the principles of personal freedom and care for the human community (which is, by and large, Franciscan teaching). It is, likewise, a criterion that does not undervalue knowledge in the form of *techné* or craft, but is more concerned with a moral wisdom that aspires to the identification and realisation of those three (very) ancient "transcendentals" of truth, beauty and goodness, including the common good. In other words, it is for the good of a society that promotes debate among peoples who, while different and even cultivating their differences, are conscious of that common good.

Within our own historical cultural context, the discussion about the common good can be approached in a number of ways, including that of the tension between the Christian *Ecce Homo* and the Nietzschean *ecce homo*. In very different historico-cultural frameworks, we can find analogous (though not, of course, identical) tensions. For example, within a society that incorporates a Confucian perspective, the tension can take the form of a distinction between two modalities of "public opinion": a *minyi* opinion, mindful, above all, of reflecting and defending the interests (and identity) of certain groups, with some prevailing over others *versus* a *minxin* opinion understood as an "enlightened" public opinion aimed at reflecting the interests of everyone as a whole*, insofar as* "all under heaven" (Zhang, 2017).

3. The pandemic, key to the crisis and a sign of the times

From a geopolitical perspective, we are facing generalised disorder or, if you prefer, we are in the middle of a transition towards a new *modus vivendi* between world order and disorder (Kissinger, 2014; Nye, 2015). This includes the long-drawn out decline of the United States, the great power *par excellence*; a decline that set in long ago (if we count the fiasco of Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s, not to mention Korea in the 50s) and has continued in recent decades under subsequent leaders, with Trump being only the most recent. It is taking place against a backdrop of a long period when the country was losing its way, and when the American establishment has largely ceded centre stage to a "rest of the world". This is comprised of a few actors anxious to play a major role, and many others around them anxious for their "fifteen minutes of fame" in the photo shoots at summits of world leaders, the latter carefully placed among their almost-equals, the twenty or thirty current regional leaders. Among them is an indecisive Europe and an uncertain Spain, with a world in transition towards who knows where... and now we have a plague, the coronavirus, sudden and overwhelming: a kind of existential threat that affects not only our health but our culture, economics, politics and society.

A public health challenge

It is said that international bodies tend to be very concerned with issues such as smoking, obesity and global warming: issues that are treated with due regard to the most influential sectors of public opinion and the economic agents involved in such matters – but who, in the case of the pandemic, have taken things much too calmly. Voices of alarm were already being raised as far back as 2015, but only at the end of 2019, and in January, 2020, were governments warned and, even then, with restraint. (Not until the beginning of March did the tone change). We can assume that, in spite of the alarm, experts continued to discuss things quietly among themselves while health systems were on automatic pilot and political leaders were lagging behind, with an eye on other things (like winning elections, losing elections, and blaming their adversaries). And although there was growing disquiet, scant intelligent attention was being paid to the issue by society.

Focusing on the case of Spain: it seems to be in an extreme situation within the global context, and within Europe Spain is to be found among those countries which have had the highest number of deaths and infections in the world per 100,000 inhabitants.[4]

The pandemic has stretched to breaking point a health system which, considering how it has functioned throughout 2020, has tried its very best to respond without anyone - health workers, citizens or politicians - knowing very well how to do so. This is because, so far, no-one understands what the illness is (mystery), nor do they know how it began (rumours) nor whether to blame it on natural causes or, more disturbingly, on human error or malice (anxiety). Such is the level of mistrust of the usual information sources that many resign themselves to perhaps never knowing. Above all, they suspect that it may happen again at any time.

Moreover, throughout this whole time the health system has been, and continues to be, only semi-coordinated. From the beginning, there was a lack of masks and other protective equipment for health workers. There were too few hospital beds, or reliable statistics. The lockdowns and track and trace systems were mishandled. It has become increasingly clear that there was an inability to coordinate the public system by national, regional or local government, let alone the combination of the public

[4]The statistical data (deaths, contagions) change continually and are not homogeneous among different countries; a useful reference is *Our World in Data. Coronavirus Pandemic* (COVID-19) (https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus).

and private systems. That lack of coordination included management of the relationships with private hospitals, care homes, chemists, health centres and hotels (which could perhaps have served as what have been called "Noah's arks", providing quarantine centres for those diagnosed with the virus).

In Spain, the pandemic has exposed the shortcomings of politicians and civil servants who have not known either how to forecast or to manage. It has also exposed the media, who have failed to provide information and have usually confined themselves to announcing only semi-intelligible trends and churning out isolated but "shocking" facts for public consumption - apart from joining in the chorus of lamentations that no-one could have seen something like this pandemic coming: not the what, nor the how, nor the why.

One gets the impression that our political (and social) leaders have sought to foresee the future without being aware of the present nor how we have arrived where we are. What is clear is that not only do the number of Covid positive tests sometimes refer to the day before, sometimes to the week before, and sometimes even to the month before, but that data is mixed together from large and small municipalities and regions in a haphazard way (Ioannidis, 2020). At the same time, the news is misinterpreted. Bad news can be good depending on how you look at it: many more cases of infection are reported as a disaster but, although the denominator (the number of cases) may be higher, the mortality rate may be comparatively lower; thus perceptions and assessments of data become confused. As for the future, everything depends on the evolution of a curve which, as it is described, is a little mystifying, mixing data, in the expectation of "reaching the peak" and the "change in trend".

In the meantime, different kinds of rhetoric have been rehearsed with which to manipulate public opinion, but almost always at the cost of dividing it. Many politicians call for unity but they do so by using words that seek to disparage and offend those to whom they appear to be reaching out. They miss no opportunity to attack a rival: which is understandable given that their customary delays usually go hand-in-hand with blindness in respect of their own errors and omissions while those of others are put under a microscope.

Social and economic challenges

The challenge of the pandemic to healthcare is taking place within the context of not only a political crisis but also economic and social ones of increasingly worrying dimensions. It has brought with it extraordinary difficulties for the economy of countries like Spain, causing a significant reduction in the growth rate and a drastic drop in activity. By way of example, one only has to remember that a reduction of some 6.5% of Spanish GDP between 2019 and 2021 has been forecast (compared to 6% for Italy, 4.4% for France and 4.2% for Portugal);[5] and that by January 2021 youth unemployment of 39.9% was estimated for Spain, in comparison with about 14.0% for the average of the OECD countries (and 29.7% in Italy).[6]

Civil society as a whole has been ordered to remain in lockdown and reduce every kind of normal activity. This has meant a substantial alteration to expectations, not only as regards living standards but also lifestyles. In the extreme, this may lead to a reduced number of encounters and interactions, and to the development of a more atomised and dispersed society: a breeding ground for submission and manipulation by both sides. With its movements and its contacts under control, society could become compliant, passive and impotent: likely to distrust everyone and everything as well as itself.

Tensions will tend to increase between different social categories. As regards social classes, the contraction and disruption of the economy caused by coronavirus will affect everyone but especially

[5]International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook*, October 2020.
[6]OECD, "Unemployment rate by age group". https://doi.org/10.787/997c8750-en (March 31, 2021)

the most vulnerable, and especially those who have already seen their plans of upward social mobility vanishing over the last decade and a half. And with the ensuing risk of increasing inequality and precarity.

Care and neglect of the elderly

As for different age groups, if the risk is high for young people, it is far higher for the elderly. Once again, we are up against an example of the (counter)culture of misinformation. In general, exhortations to care for everyone together with appeals to perseverance and confidence in the future are, of course, praiseworthy. In the meantime, however, the general public is being accustomed to signals that some "very hard" decisions will have to be taken, and "some/many" allowed to die in order to save the economy. This could be seen to have merit: in the long-term a health system cannot exist without economic resources; but it runs the risk of abandoning the very elderly to their fate. In the case of Spain, these are no less than the survivors of the Civil War who went on to build the democratic country of today. Vulnerable old people who, it is now clear, are being neglected rather than cared for.

A substantial number of that generation are in residential care. In 2019, there were 373,000 elderly residents in care homes out of a population of over-eighty year-olds of 2,880,000 (Abellán García, Aceituno and Fariñas, 2019). The circumstances in which they live, however, are such that, even if unintentionally, they have become the pawns in a convoluted game of "care and neglect". Although they have been given pensions, which cost the public purse increasingly more, and they are looked after, they are virtually confined in care homes with hardly any medical services. Once they are in those care homes, or perhaps in hospital or a nursing home, it is obvious how these elderly people start to decline. They are apparently worthless. Worthless because, it seems, their experience is no longer in demand, given that a modern economy requires re-learning everything every day and seems to dispense with experience. Worthless because they would continue to hold down jobs that other, younger people "should" have.

In general terms, contemporary policies do not seem to have been designed with the elderly in mind, but "for the future": for those allegedly ambitious people with plans, ready to re-invent themselves and to succeed. Except that they are now more likely to live in perpetual "precarity", distracted by the economic, political and cultural advertising in vogue. What will come later, in the small print, is euthanasia, cremation, the cemeteries without graves, the churches without services, the curtailed goodbyes, the funerary urns in cupboards, and the ashes scattered across seas and mountains. And a few words - if those who utter them have learned public speaking (not something that seems to be commonly taught in the schools of today).

In fact, the rhetoric that is being introduced, and explored, is that of saving the economy by accepting the slipping away of the elderly into... nothingness. This could entail an eloquent silence that would facilitate the death of tens of thousands (and perhaps millions of them across the world).

That said, it is possible that the extreme nature of this situation could produce certain moral progress whereby adults - and even young people - rediscover their parents, and shun the party culture and rituals of binge-drinking that are presented as paeans to life and self-affirmation. The Bastille disappeared over two centuries ago, and the streets of Paris are no longer lined with the cobbles that were used as projectiles half-a-century ago; but what will always remain is the indignation, the protests and the news bulletins. And it is not necessary to insist on "the eternal return" of a simulacrum of great deeds – we may hope that one day young people will rediscover the prospect of caring for their elders as a great achievement. (Perhaps as a feature characteristic of a culture of magnanimity...)

In seeking to justify neglect of the elderly, there has been an attempt to cast around for a reason, arriving at the distinction between thinking in terms of "human lives" and in "years of life". As is logical from the point of view of those who consider that human beings can be divided up by different experiences, dimensions or age groups, it is thought to be appropriate to do so in terms of years of life. Younger people will, logically have more years of life ahead of them compared to older people and, therefore, one should think twice about investing public resources in the latter. An "objective calculation" has been made that the value of a human being in old age would come to be some 67% (give or take) of that of a younger person (Porter and Tankersley, 2020). Hence, if the resources available are not sufficient to care for everyone, then it could be argued that it is preferable to care for those who are worth more (who will generate more resources for the system) because they have more years ahead of them; and provide less care for those with fewer years to live because, "objectively", they are worth less. It would almost seem "right and fair". In the end, there would be fewer pensioners, which would save the public purse, and it would provide an additional stimulus, for example, to the cremation industry and affiliated jobs.

On the public space: mixed prospects

As we know, the pandemic has severely affected the economy, and the effects of lockdowns, for example, are visible both in the substantial reduction in economic activity, and in having caused ordinary people, producers and consumers, businesses and governments, to have to struggle on with far fewer resources. Everyone has been left searching for solutions provided by a kind of experimental economic policy, and remembering what it was possible to learn from the crisis of 2008-12, the crisis of the 1970s and even from that of 1929 - crises from which, however, not enough was ever learned to avoid the next one.

The argument will go on, defined primarily by battles over "more free market" or "more state intervention". Such battles are usually seen in a favourable light by politicians, who tend to insist on the need to "show a united front" and "trust in our leadership" - but these are strange exhortations to be hearing from those who preach, indefatigably, division and distrust with respect to "the other half" of the country.

However, it is not easy to trust in leaders who, in addition to being divisive, do not seem to be especially competent. Who promise, perhaps, to provide resources (such as vaccinations) that are usually delayed. Who try to lay out a road map that, in reality, turns out to be no more than a confused and confusing experiment. Who belong to a government that is frequently changing direction, wavering between so-called hard measures and other so-called realistic ones, using imprecise language, and waiting to see whether events will, in the end, allow them to be self-congratulatory and/or lay the blame on others. (Which demonstrates an opportunistic attitude rather than the one of the *Character of a Trimmer*, who steers his boat, ready to adapt, but with a destination in mind: Halifax's concept, collected by Oakeshott, 1996: 122 ff.).

All in all, it is clear that discussions held in the public space can have a crucial effect on the handling of the pandemic. The terms and arguments employed in speeches and slogans require translation and specification, but they can help to define the problems within some kind of context: lockdown or not, for example, and how strict it should be, how to get almost everyone back to work, or whether to allocate more or less money to certain sectors or others, etc. The debate, therefore, can bring what is being proposed out into the public space before a general public unaccustomed to anything other than the semi-articulation of their own thinking, little given to listening and at times only half-aware, previously inattentive and, right now, frightened.

It appears that citizens, civil society, only partially trust their political leaders (or, should we say, their public-private leaders). Partially, or very little at all - in which case, it is as if, when they vote, they were taking part in a magical process. As if voters were voting predicated on little more than watching the flight of birds, scrutinising the entrails of animals or interpreting the movement of the stars, without knowing the whys or the wherefores. And one last detail: ultimately, people do not trust their leaders because they know how little they know. Although we should remember that people do also know other things: that although they can ignore, complain and get indignant about events, they can also gather enough civic courage to take the first steps along the path of civic debate, decision-making and action.

It does seem, therefore, that it is essential to take those first steps in order to learn something. To re-discover, for instance, the relevance of the advice given by Confucius on the "rectification of names", in other words, "to call things by their right name" to better reflect the reality of things and of experiences. If language is no use to us because we give multiple, changeable and confusing meanings to words, then we cease to communicate among ourselves and, without communication, there can be no community. Nor any social order. We merely refer to values which we do not know if we share. We find ourselves with an empty culture, the content of which each one of us attempts to define according to how we feel at the time. We believed that a certain order existed but we wake up to a contradictory society; that we had a shared morality, but we find one that is fragmented.

In such a situation, it is logical that political life merely glosses a narrative of characters in search of an author, who will write the play that they can perform and - in its absence - people get on with life but in a state of confusion. Awaiting news. All of us self-isolating in our houses, waiting... Looking at the four walls of our house-cage, and the television screen. Just at a time when we most need to be cared for by others... there are no others. Just when we need to *keep calm and carry on* knowing what it is all about; we don't know what it is about. We go to our windows to make a gesture. (Or we shout: "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this any more", like Peter Finch in Sidney Lumet's film *Network*, 1976.) Or we close the window and we wait. There are still interesting alternatives: virtual encounters, silent moments, household chores, new hobbies, that could even turn out to be "really something".

In short, the outlook is daunting in the extreme. The virus can attack through asymptomatic carriers. It may also return in a second wave, and a third wave... And, as we know, it has already mutated and may do so again. Each success in the fight against it seems slight. At times, it seems as though we may be doomed to a world of almost indefinite isolation: of unpredictable alternations between lockdowns and freedom of movement; of innumerable rumours and half-truths.

It might even seem prudent, in these circumstances, to start wearing not just a facemask but a full-face visor, and live in it: creating a thicker and more permanent obstacle between us and the virus. Trying to defying this enigma which has turned our lives upside-down while we wait for findings to be deciphered, with our own masked presence like just one more enigma.

Then again, this could have its interesting aspects. We would have to learn to communicate anew and, in the absence of "innovating for innovation's sake", we could try and revert to some of our old practices. And we might discover, in fact, that our newer practices are disappointing. In other words: if we were astronauts orbiting the moon, we would likely be closer to our fellows than we are right now. Going around and around. Just like in a whirlwind. Or in a whirlpool, in the middle of a stormy sea, increasingly turbulent... and not knowing how long it will last.

On a more "optimistic and pragmatic" note

The above description will need adjustment in the light of future events as they occur over the next months and years; but, already, it requires a precautionary corrective and a boost of "pragmatism and optimism" (what David Brooks characterises as "the best of American liberalism": *New York Times,* 16th December, 2020). It must take account of a scenario shaped both by political leaders anxious to reassure society and justify themselves, and by sceptics and realists who mistrust dramatic generalisations and have the courage to face up to the most disturbing data. Among these data are the management failures and rhetorical excesses of the élites in office (with that bitter-sweet sensation that nothing has ever changed) within the context of a continuous, or at least recurring, process of error correction.

If we adopt this perspective of "pragmatic optimism" then it should be pointed out, firstly, that it is normal to expect a somewhat erratic evolution of the pandemic (after all, the last one was a hundred years ago and the one before that - the Black Death, to which everyone refers - was nearly seven hundred years ago). Secondly, if there were no facemasks or tests or protective equipment for healthcare workers, it is reasonable to assume that, in time, there would be - causing, in the meantime, moments of panic and anxiety interspersed with calm. Thirdly, that judgements have always been made, for example, on the basis of the varying life expectancies of different cohorts of patients, both actual and potential, when it comes to deciding on the healthcare budget. Fourthly, that, in any case, the data for each country must be viewed within the context of what is happening in all the others. These data have all tended to be quite worrying, and if they are worse in some countries, it is logical to expect these to learn from those which are performing better. Lastly, that, in time, it is to be hoped that immunity will develop across populations and that vaccines will continue to be discovered and distributed; which is exactly what appears to be happening at the end of 2020, and will continue throughout the coming year.

As for the economy, from that same perspective, we should be confident that the situation will start to improve thanks to a combination of what we could call the wisdom of the markets as well as that of experts and civil servants, the educated élites, and the masses. Consider, for example, the combination of the wisdom of politicians and citizens. Although the tendency of politicians is to fight for power among themselves, there may yet come a time when they pay attention to what their electorates think. For example, when they realise that, even though 96% of the public want national pacts in order to combat the pandemic, only 29% consider such pacts to be likely (from a survey by *Metroscopia* on 8th Abril, 2020: see *Círculo Cívico de Opinión*, 2020). In other words, we can be fairly confident that, sooner or later, politicians will remember their need to satisfy social demand if they wish to be elected or re-elected: a timely reminder which makes politicians fulfil their electoral promises with some frequency. Relatively sound pieces of civic wisdom may result from the further development of communications thanks to the media, social media and scientific progress. (Not forgetting the "wisdom of nature": the transition from one season to the next, with the hottest ones being the least favourable for the further spread of the pandemic.)

There is no doubt that all this must be taken into account. Moreover, it is advisable to prevent any dramatic excesses insofar as it seems healthy to maintain a positive and hopeful frame of mind. All the more so because the future is, obviously, unpredictable, and a kind of secular wisdom reminds us that, as the Sufis say, "what has to happen, will happen". Happen it will, but in the sense that it will lead on to something else. And yet, even so, it is precisely because of this unpredictable nature of the future, together with the intensity of the heightened perceptions and sensations of the present, added to the disorder of European and Spanish experiences in general, all of which is vexed further by the innumerable questions swirling around unanswered, that it is essential to preserve the fundamentals of that sensation of chaos. The greatest mistake in these circumstances would be to play down our

predicament. First, the damage that a worsening of the situation could engender is enormous; second, the probability that such a thing will happen is relatively high; and third, therefore, the resultant risk of multiplying the damage by the probability argues for a return to that image of the whirlpool.

4. The descent, the leap of faith, and the ascent from the maelström

The scene of the maelström

In short, citizens may, and perhaps do, perceive themselves as living in a mix of order and disorder, whereby capitalism brings with it, on the one hand, growth, work, a welfare system and freedom of movement but, on the other, recurring crises, the risk of poverty, inequality, precarity, subordination and exploitation. Therefore, democracy, the worst form of government except for all the others (Churchill *dixit*), has its inverse in partitocracy, distrust of political élites and a distorted public space. Therefore, although societies appear to be more connected, the fact is they fragment, they atomise and they become obsessed with their differences. Therefore, culture seems more capable of promoting and disseminating (natural) science, technology and information; and yet the narrative of shared experience escapes us, historic memory is a battlefield, and attempts at civic conversation take place in a space full of misunderstandings, more like a Tower of Babel.

Against this dramatic background of a general nature, specific cases stand out. One such is Spain, which is subject today to the tensions of this dreadful pandemic, a very challenging economic situation, the probable increase of social tensions as a result, and political manoeuvring to undermine territorial unity and the constitutional framework. At the same time, it has to withstand a political class determined to turn politics into confrontation and a game of mutual recriminations. All this is the result of a set of moral and cognitive dispositions and orientations endlessly reproduced by an extremely weak education system, as is demonstrated by the crudeness of a public debate that underscores the mediocrity of the political class as well as the timidity and inertia of civil society.

What “can be done”? Or rather, what “can we do” to remedy the situation? We could respond in the same way as Cervantes/Don Quixote who is, after all, our supreme universal symbol. We should remember what our hero tells us as he is setting out. Where is he going? What does he want to do? And what is he thinking about? Well, he is thinking “about the wrongs he would right, the grievances redress, the absurdities rectify, the abuses improve and the debts settle” (Part 1, Chapter 2) which, in more prosaic (generic and abstract) language comes to mean “imposing a little order on a chaotic world.”

That is how our protagonist comes to set off across the broad plains of Castille, through La Mancha, letting himself be taken by his horse. Through those vast lands, like the high seas, open to the four winds. If we follow the trail of literary images, and transport ourselves through space and time, to the New England of the second half of the nineteenth century, it can lead us to an allegory that allows us to sketch out an *ad hoc* argument, observe a sequence and draw a conclusion.

Imagine being spun around in the middle of a whirlpool, and our hero, or we ourselves, have no time to waste in deciding what to do about it. A whirlpool out in the ocean. What are the odds of sinking or floating? Of disappearing or surviving? The allegory is to be found within the tale by the American writer and poet, critic and journalist, born in Boston, Massachusetts some two centuries ago, Edgar Allan Poe. It is called *Descent into the Maelström* (1978 [1841]), which is a stimulating and enlightening read with which to face up to our current predicament. Dramatic but not fatalistic; hopeful but challenging.

The story begins with the narrator looking out to sea from the edge of a high cliff, from where he makes out what seem to be the contours of a huge circle far out in the open sea, where the water is surging and frothing and there is a far-off muffled roaring. Accompanying him is an old man, white-haired, with an air of exhaustion, who tells him that he has been there.

He goes on to explain that his fishing smack was swept off course and tossed around in powerful cross-currents until he and his brother found themselves on the edge of an immense whirlpool. The boat was spun around and around as it was drawn in and began to sink. He clung on to the shrouds, and to the sails, with all his might. He saw the boat surrounded by gyrating debris of all kinds, timber, masts and spars. They were desperate. He saw his brother about to go under. The noise was deafening, the speed increasing, the darkness intensifying.

In the midst of it all, the only thing remaining to him was... curiosity. A kind of passion to know, to understand, as much as he was able, what was happening. He looked carefully. And after some time he realised that, although much of the debris sank down into the abyss that seemed to swallow it up, not all of it did. In fact, there were objects that spun and spun but did not sink and were not engulfed and dragged to the bottom. Some of them even seemed to be rising up. He took note of what they were. They were... like barrels. They were cylinders: perhaps, he speculated, their shape reduced or deflected the pressure of the ocean currents.

He could not be sure of the explanation for what he was seeing and, perhaps, he thought, he did not have the facility to explain it. But he was sure that his observations were telling him that, after all, the barrels escaped being sucked to the bottom. They bobbed back up. It was a fact.

Without further thought, gambling on that vague, inexplicable perception, an instinct for survival, a tentative intuition, and facing imminent death, he called out to his brother, in similar straits, to try and save himself. But he didn't reply. At the very last minute, with time running out, he decided to jump... and he jumped onto one of the barrels. Lashing himself to it, he began to spin round and round but he was rising upwards... And he reached the surface of the water, and, eventually, the beach. Now here he is, on the cliff, telling his story, with his hair turned white from shock, absorbed in his memories, having lived through something almost impossible to share except by the telling of it: to the poet. And the poet, to us...

Three steps: curiosity, a leap of faith, and where to go and what to avoid

And so, what can we do? We can use this story for our own purpose. We are in the middle of a maelström *sui generis*, a chaos affecting our healthcare, politics, economy, culture and society and we must try and escape from the abyss. What we need to do is to look closely, to watch out for "a barrel", to "work out a theory" or not even work one out... but just do *something* on the basis of plausible intuition. To put it another way, we are talking about two actions: to observe-and-reason and then to decide. If we consider the handling of the pandemic, for example, then curiosity leads us to observe and to reason as much about the application of science as the use of common sense and a rational public space. It is not, however, only a case for reasoning: it is also, and above all, about throwing ourselves onto "a barrel", seizing hold of it and hanging on for dear life.

This story of the maelström can be interpreted as quite a complex allegory. It should not be reduced merely to a symbol of chaos (confusion and violence), but seen as a story that contains a number of connecting elements. It is a question of understanding the complete sequence of the descent and the ascent, as a whole, and not only the descent.[7] One has to take into account the debris whirling around

[7]Focus on the phase of descent can be seen in the discussion on politics in the United States in the 1960s as being the forerunner of the politics of division (Cohen, 2016).

(the abandoned boat, the barrel onto which he leaps) and the three steps taken by the protagonist: his assessment of the situation, his leap of faith, and what he clings on to and where it takes him. That involves interpreting, first, what it means to take that leap; second, the meaning of the barrel onto which he leaps; and third, what the abyss could be from which he is trying to escape. (These questions involve an assessment, a risk, a possible community of conversation and of action - and a moral and emotional commitment to avoiding external and internal chaos, without falling into the temptation of timidity or inertia.)

To leap is to gamble. This is the equivalent of a Pascalian or, one could say, a "Napoleonic" notion or (to take the comparison still further) even a "Leninist" one (Walicki, 1979) - insofar as the latter appropriated the words of Napoleon when, asked what his grand strategy was, he replied: "*on s'engage et puis on voit...",* [you commit yourself, and then you see...] and they did indeed see the sometimes disastrous results.

Nevertheless, the quotation is misleading, because what Napoleon does not say is that his *engagement,* or commitment, begins through curiosity and includes reasoning. Decisions make sense based on motivation and one's judgement of a situation. The reasoning may be that of a narcissist, an autistic person, a sensible patriot, a competent military strategist or a patient in a psychiatric hospital (who believes that he *is* Napoleon). Similar reasoning could be applied to the leap from the maelström and to the barrel. The sense of it comes from the combination of a reactive impulse - fleeing chaos and death - and a proactive one - survival and an aspiration for order and peace. Whatever the reasoning, it is a commitment to a course of action, an existential decision, a mixture of speculation and sensations, memories and projects which accompany the sequence of the leap. To put it another way, it is the first step that leads on to the subsequent ones which begin to form a path.

The image of a "barrel"

Nonetheless, a leap onto... a barrel? This is, at first sight a strange image. The barrel is, however, a protected and protective space in which to be safe - protected by its convexity and the sturdiness of the staves and hoops. Just the opposite of the mass of splinters which the wreck of the boat is about to become, and from which the sailor is trying to escape. He abandons the community of the sinking ship and he takes a leap to what is, or what could become, another community.

The barrel can be a symbol for a space shared with others, where the experience of a community develops with... some "others", with whom there is sufficient common cause to stay together; to play together. Thus, they are invited to the common game of staying afloat, just as the sailor invites his brother - who turns a deaf ear.

We could also consider the barrel as being the object of a mutation or transfiguration. As if we did not simply remain outside it, clinging on to it. The barrel has an opening: if we go inside, we find... a room: a space where one can argue, play, meditate, make decisions. The barrel may even undergo a new metamorphosis in classical Ovidian fashion and be transformed... into a house - like the flying house of Judy Garland in the Wizard of Oz (the film directed by Victor Fleming in 1939, over eighty years ago). It is whisked away by a tornado into a different universe and she opens the door and finds... the yellow brick road which will lead her, and lead all of us, to the doors of the castle of the eponymous wizard. Our heroine and her companions, pilgrims all, set out on a journey to find their way Over the Rainbow, and it will eventually take them all back home.

However, the image of the barrel in this story says less to us about flying and returning home than it does about staying afloat and surviving. Although our protagonist does more than just survive: he tells

his story to a stranger, the poet-narrator, so that it will be passed on to us and we... should do something with it. One step leads to the next and they all fit together, the same as in a ballet.

Strictly speaking, the barrel-object as such does not correspond to, or does not relate, to the person clinging onto to it as subject to subject. It is more like a metaphor for a space in which an encounter takes place between the one clinging to the barrel and... those who make room for him inside it, help him to tie himself in and to endure the struggle. They have opened a door for him, sat him at the table and, being different, and faithful to their differences, engage in a debate or a conversation together. And the conversation turns into a game... a chess game? It is as if the leap to the gyrating barrel were giving us the opportunity to find ourselves in a conversation space and a potential community, but for what purpose? To play a game? To make peace? To avoid chaos?

If we find a conversation space, it is not for the kind of conversation *à la française* that is simple diversion - to display sparkling wit and ingenuity - that Madame de Staël (1965 [1813], vol. I: 101 ff.) compared to the typical German conversation between "*esprits serieux*", each obsessed with taking their arguments to their ultimate conclusion. This is a space for a conversation different to both of these: open, and leading to agreements and disagreements in a process of moving forward, or getting by, together.

What must be avoided is the chaos and the extremes of entropy at the bottom of the abyss. As a metaphor, the splintering apart and breaking-up of the boat caused by the whirlpool becomes the effect on society of disconnection, disorder, inertia and nothingness. In other words, of a state of existence that is no existence at all; and which, in terms of human feelings and ways of being in the world, could be called depression, sadness or idleness. The brother of our sailor remains on his boat, even as it is sinking and as he cannot make up his mind to jump, he is drowned. He lets this happen, he fails to act, and thereby allows the chaos of the world to continue. This can occur in a climate of desperation and misery amid shouts of despair; and yet more often, it is in a climate of apathy and resignation and passes unnoticed.

Is the abyss of Europe one of indifference and sadness? Or is it rather one of mediocrity? A Europe that is provincial, self-centred and content to misremember what it has been wont to call its past triumphs, colonies and conquests, ready to be re-imagined through the prism of the ideology, the mentality and the commonplaces of each moment? A Europe not knowing what to do with, or for, the rest of the world? It is without internal peace, and without a genuine mission for peace in a world that now wonders if it was actually owned by it for two or three centuries, with its relatively ephemeral accomplishments, part glorious and part dubious.

Today, it is a Europe of reciprocal indifference (let us remember, with Proust, the small step that separates indifference from cruelty; 1954 [1917]: 165]) and not one based on friendship. It is the indifference that results from lost friendship; and the sadness that results from the breakdown of a friendship. One that was built around common experiences, over and above the interplay of interests and ideas; and it is disappearing.

I include personal, deeply felt and genuine testimony from a Spanish lawyer and businesswoman, who has been resident in England for many years, talking about her experience of Brexit. It underlines not only the sadness of the recent parting but also the sadness of seeing a "having-lived-together" becoming a "having-believed-we-lived-together". In her own words, "You know how you feel when you have given everything for someone and, when you least expect it, they ditch you as if you meant nothing to them? Well, change 'person' to 'country' and that's how I feel about the United Kingdom leaving the European Union: desertion, a tremendous disappointment and, above all, sadness, so much sadness. We Europeans who have come to live in the United Kingdom (...) we have built our

lives here with the British... paid our taxes, helped to build their businesses (...) brought up our children, made friends, supported initiatives (...) treated their country as if it were our own (...) loved their country as if it were our own." (González Durántez, 2020).

In turn, the sadness of lost friendship can prolong an earlier mutual indifference; that may surface again at any moment. For example, the kind that was observed in the initial European reaction to the pandemic which was, strangely enough, for members to distance themselves from each other. Only later, when reconsidering, thinking about what was in their best long-term interests, did the different countries began a conversation with a view to possible health and economic coordination, envisaging major plans - and we shall see what happens. In any case, whether it proves to be a breaking of ties or a leaping together, the possibility remains open to take a gamble and play the game.

The leap of faith, and a game with an underlying strategy and a long-term objective

The combination of the various crises described above leaves us facing a dramatic choice between a civilised society or a chaotic deviation – a sort of Pascalian wager between justice and chaos (Pascal, 1950 [1659-1661]: section 3). This choice, the battle between the two, is being played out on many fronts. In an earlier essay (Pérez-Díaz, 2020a), I suggested the image of a series of simultaneous chess games as providing a strategic vision of the whole. The "leap onto the barrel" would be one of these games: a game of strategic scope that conditions the objective and, therefore, the direction, depth and timescale of the ongoing process.

The objective can be defined in many different ways, depending on the perspective that one adopts. The one I adopt here is rooted in the memory of the West and corresponds to a tradition - intermittent within it (and others) - which has existed for some two and a half thousand years; and which the culture of modernity has been attempting to reconfigure with varied (and limited) success for the last few centuries. In this case, the objective would be to move closer to the ideal of a "civilised and reasonable" society; understood as one in which a market economy (an expression of personal freedom) is incorporated into, and is part of,[8] a whole that further includes a welfare system, a sound regulatory framework, a limited state, a participative liberal democracy, a lively and autonomous public space, a state of law and the division of powers. This is an institutional whole animated and inspired by, and based on, a complex and fragmentary culture that attempts to combine recognition of personal freedom with a moral responsibility of care for others and for the community as such. An essential component of that whole is a free, plural and dynamic associative fabric. An associative fabric (formal and informal, and including the family) without which all the rest become corrupted - the market, the public space, democracy and the law - and without which, culture, in particular, withers away, swamped by doctrines, exhortations, ideas and words left hanging meaningless in the air.

This objective of a rational society reconciled with itself is by no means, and nor is it intended to be, the latest innovation. In reality, a similar model to the one that I have outlined has been a recurring reference point of our historical experience and, wholly or partly, it is frequently (increasingly?) remembered even now. We can consider this (ambitious) objective as a plausible (possible and desirable) one that forms an important part of a traditional European collective imagery, with different tonalities and settings from one country to another. It is rather like a polar star, a sign on the horizon and, as such, already a part of the landscape - even though we may be very conscious that the effective realisations of this model in history have tended to be little more than either 'second best' or the 'lesser evil' in comparison with the alternatives at the time. (Pérez-Díaz, 2014).

[8] In Polanyi's (1992 [1944]) terms, it would be embedded in this whole, to which I usually refer as "civil society in a broad sense" (Pérez-Díaz, 2014).

How important is the knowledge that the realisation of this objective is problematic? Perhaps not that much because although, on the one hand, realism obliges us to recognise that the ideal society is subject to recurrent oligarchic and demagogic tendencies, and that this reality is resistant to good intentions; on the other hand, this resistance to reality can prove to be useful. For example, it can serve as an incentive for resolving to be patient and persevering; and for adapting to and observing and learning from the zigzagging path of the past and from the many ongoing experiments of the present. It could even encourage us not to falter in the effort to keep our sights set high and to cultivate a magnanimous spirit. In order to do that, we can turn, among other things, to a fund of auspicious symbolisms that includes, for example, the image of the Sienese dance celebrating the peace of *buon governo* [good government] in the frescoes by Lorenzetti (once again Tuscany and the Late Middle Ages...) (Skinner, 2002). It is an image twinned with the rhetoric of political power seen as the key not to mere anti-Machiavellianism but to the belief that "to govern is to serve" which comes to be a kind of equivalent to the "maternal government" (*sicut mater*) recommended by St. Francis of Assisi in his letter to Brother Leo.[9]

All this reminds us how much magnanimity there can be in humility; and how much greatness in small things (and how much of the present in the apparently anachronistic). And at this point, I shall conclude this paper by focusing on the detail of the associative fabric.

5. The strategic importance of small spaces, ordinary people and civil society

Small spaces and big projects

Big projects require close attention to detail. When it comes to designing and implementing a strategy for achieving the main objective of a society such as the one that I have been describing, it would be necessary to coordinate or, at the very least, take account of a number of tasks and their corresponding simultaneous games. These would include finding a voice on the world geopolitical stage, undertaking ambitious social and economic policies, major structural reforms, the nurturing of complex rites and narratives, the general introduction of a policy calculated to create institutional incentives which would act as levers that guided, in one way or another, people's behaviours, the strengthening of a legal system that minimises the risk of violence, and many other things. But I now wish to concentrate on a single, crucial strategic piece that is, however, often overlooked.

In short, all the major policies and strategies mentioned above require to be implemented and continued over time; this, in turn, requires a citizenry among whom what we could call, in Aristotelian fashion, "the virtues of the multitude" tend to prevail (Cammack, 2013). Although it is true to say that the élites are in charge, the reality is that they do not have that much authority, and neither do historical processes tend to obey them in the way that they would like. Thus, in the long term, they need a certain amount of consensus, acquiescence and collaboration on the part of their citizens, who may not merely accept future public policies and reforms but should participate in discussions about them; and might even initiate and experiment with them on their own account - and come to educate their own élites by means of massive amounts of common sense and a sense of the commons.

At the same time, being realistic, we should remember that (in the light of experience through the ages) citizens are as likely to behave in a reasonable and civic fashion as they are to behave badly in a clientilistic or anti-social manner, for example; or like people who are bi-polar who alternate submission with resentment, or who allow themselves to be duped into hunting for and persecuting scapegoats at the behest of the demagogues and inquisitors in power.

[9]Possibly part of a retrospective (and a post-modern?) utopia of "medieval democracy" (Dalarun, 2012).

The answer to the question of whether a society will behave in one way or another depends largely on the presence or absence within it of a certain kind of associative fabric: the kind in which the socio-cultural spaces can be found that are necessary for individuals to be able to form habits of reasonableness and civism, and respect for the differences and freedom of others, together with the disposition for cooperation and fair competition. These spaces should also allow for people to develop their capacity for observing reality, challenging their own and others' judgments, and organising their thoughts and expressing them in public. Such socio-cultural spaces are of varying sizes, but generally quite modest and accessible, and they allow the formation and development of the habits and character appropriate for taking an active part in a political community.

Returning to the literary metaphors above, the image of the barrel that the shipwrecked man clung to so tightly evokes just such a protective and protected space (and it is a space similar to the circle of Dorothy's companions as they make their way along the yellow brick road to Oz). It harks back to our earliest experience of small spaces, and of mutual concern and support: communities at play, at work or at school, a varied associative fabric and socio-family networks that make possible the combination of interactions, organisation and feelings of the small groups that constitute the elemental forms of society (Homans, 1961). They are not the most famous or most powerful parts of a society but it could be said that, in the same way that to be useless can be the key to what is most useful (Leys, 2012), true greatness (the habitual aim of the magnanimous) can be found and, perhaps, better understood in terms of the most humble.

On the here and now

Focusing attention on the associative fabric offers us an opportunity to commit to a broad but discreet strategy *sui generis*, of "guerrilla warfare" designed for action "right away" (rather than the deferred action typified by Larra's satirical phrase of "Vuelva usted mañana" [come back tomorrow]); that is, in the here and now of each individual in their own immediate surroundings.

From this perspective, the leap from the abyss of the maelström could be reformulated in terms of *carpe diem* - of seizing the day - considering it as a unique opportunity as well as an expression of gratitude for the miracle of being alive, and of being together, and thus, of understanding and being capable of taking action. Understanding, taking action, each of us individually, and with others; and, in this way, taking responsibility without leaving things to remote officials - such as politicians, for example. Once we have set out, we must continue; as if the reason for being and the very being of each one of us were our path; as if, for the mountaineer, the path that leads to the top is already the top (Söhngen, 1961: 80).

Conversely, not to make the leap, "not to do anything", would be an indication of not understanding things, and witness to the inertia of someone who, refusing to jump, resigns himself to being carried away by the whirlpool into oblivion. (No doubt complaining and indignant all the while, but with less and less conviction on finding himself increasingly alone; or - the irony, perhaps, of human ambiguity - resigned to what appears to be divine election).

Ultimately, a grand strategy whose ultimate objective is the achievement of a free and viable society, reconciled with itself, can only succeed by means of some variant of a "politics of virtue" (Milbank and Pabst, 2016) that surpasses mere politics; in other words, a living culture that encompasses the diverse lifestyles of its citizens in general. It cannot be a culture that is reduced to proclaiming certain values, but one understood as a performance and as a way of life; of a virtuous and courageous way of life. This is particularly relevant to ordinary people, who can only exercise adequate control over (and educate) their élites if, at the same time that they rein in the latters' arrogance, they resist their own tendency (their temptation) to submit to voluntary servitude.

Taking account of the tacticist perspective of the "pragmatic optimists"

The building of a political community is a task for everyone and not just the elites. The elites themselves know this very well, although they take on their role of protagonists in public life with enthusiasm. Accustomed to managing the system on a day-to-day basis, and to appear to do so in times of crisis, it is understandable that they tend to assume a rather "pragmatic and optimistic" attitude when they refer to a sequence of events (almost always "under control") or to the attainment of their goals (although always needing some compromises). Their tempo is somewhat accelerated/startling, but they enjoy many breaks, not only to relax and enjoy their celebrity but also to perfect their political techniques, giving them an opportunity to refine their cunning, and their discretion.

They soon learn that, on important issues, the acquiescence of ordinary people, which they need so much, can be a short-lived commodity. This is largely because, when dealing with complicated issues like, for example, the economy (or the environment or geopolitics), the basic data is abundant, complex and (as the devil is in the detail) difficult to understand. Thus, however much they try to simplify the debate with left and right-wing heuristics, and different collective identities, for the purpose of obtaining the acquiescence of their citizens, the fact is that the general public endorses public policies *only to a certain degree*. Truth be told, the attachment of "the masses" (a term fallen into some disrepute) to the slogans, the programmes and the images of their leaders is usually revealed to be temporary and superficial. All the more so when, whether they admit it or not, citizens have not really learned the lessons of the past and, besides, they do not trust their politicians very far.

These reservations on the part of society lend a certain fragility to all the major strategic decisions that are taken; long-lasting and reasoned support from society simply does not exist. This has repercussions due to the fact that any agreement among the élites already tends to be fragile and will be come under attack as soon as there is any change in the balance of power: almost, it could be said, from the day it is signed. This highlights the advisability of having a clearly-defined course of action that will serve as a reference for the decisions that are taken, and as a horizon for the current state of affairs. In this way, it will allow a dialogue that will make it possible to feel that we are learning as much from the fulfilment of expectations as from their non-fulfilment.

By way of example, and to illustrate the need for a course of action and an objective in the long-term, I would cite the importance of the project to create a space of friendship between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. This, in its turn, would be connected to the objective of uniting Europe (and it could also have profound consequences for the handling of the pandemic). Being realistic (or "pragmatic"), one has to recognise that, without a space of friendship (or at least one in the process of creation) the integration of Catalonia in Spain will seem as forced to the two million who support independence as its separation will seem to the two million who are opposed to it, and the rest of the Spanish population. "Forced" means imposed, therefore generating resentment and hostility. This would affect not only Spain but the whole of Europe, which would see how a focal point had been created for continual or recurring disagreements of differing degrees of severity but often very worrying, in a crucial area of its territory, halfway between the Atlantic and the western Mediterranean. It is obvious that this would be an incentive for the development of further inter-state and inter-regional tensions; and that, in geopolitical terms, it would mean a highly dangerous vulnerability.

Once more, it is here that the (limited and biased) perspective of the pragmatists can contribute indirectly to a better understanding of the situation. Because we should be asking: "how is it possible to move forward with an ambitious, mythopoetic and religious/caring project of a reconciled human community, or a space of friendship, if the "practical details" of economic, political and social conflicts

are neglected? In which case, exhortations run the risk of becoming irrelevant. Great ideals are reduced to fine words.

That said, (and continuing this line of argument), in order to achieve immediate and tangible results, the first step is... that every one should take *their* first step, they should be responsible for what they do, and they should find a way of taking the next step. Everyone should feel a little like Socrates, who asks his question and takes note of the answer of the oracle, of his inner voice and that of his close community, as well as of what he finds, resists and he remakes, with his "Socratic dialogues" and with the many tasks of living and fighting together.

Hence, the ordinary citizens of our contemporary societies can, on the one hand, understand, criticise, correct and demand accountability, and on the other, do something for themselves. Or, what comes to the same thing, they can take an active part in the public debate and organise innumerable initiatives on their own account, without waiting for permission. They can apply a measure of common sense based on their everyday experience, and largely corroborated (with a reasonable margin for doubt) by the popular and sapiential wisdom of millennia. There is no need of an academic education, political indoctrination, dogmatism, a publicity campaign or any special business or technological innovation.

By way of an afterword

It is a matter of getting down to work, nose to the grindstone. Getting through all the work involved in academic courses, jobs, businesses, healthcare, information and the form and content of communications, facemasks, the use of languages, family benefits and/or allowing families to help themselves - and the continuous "rectification of names" that must go on alongside these constant endeavours. Issue by issue, being able to distinguish the whole but taking things step by step. It is up to us all, one by one, and yet with each other. Up to us to decide to vote, to raise our voices, to take action - and, with our individual decisions, will come the experience and the awareness of how little everything means if it is not all being done with others.

The proposal to combine the vision of the ultimate objective with the succession of immediate actions indicates a strategy of "overcoming" the crisis rather an "exit" from it. This, in turn, requires the agents in question to use their skills in comprehension and interpretation, allowing for their own perspectives and strategies, influenced as these are by their life experiences, and by a range of symbolisms of diverse origin - including those deriving from the sapiential wisdom of the Axial Age, and of many cultural traditions, up to the present day.

I have illustrated the thrust of my argument with many references and I conclude with a brief mention of the visual arts and literature - images and narratives. The image of *Il buon governo* by Lorenzetti expresses the aspirations and nostalgia of a community reconciled. It portrays a dance of peace and magnanimity, and of life, which would flourish with more vigour because of it. But the idyll is interrupted by a crisis, a war or a plague. The visual image gives way to a narrative one: in which the circle is broken up, and the boat sinks in the middle of a whirlpool - Poe's Maelström. Then a reaction occurs, the "leap onto the barrel", whose upward momentum makes it look as if the water has become lava, and the black hole, a volcano in eruption. This volcano, with its rivers of earth and fire, of solid forms, appears in the abstract expressionist painting of *El cráter* [The Crater] by Marina Olivares - the hole is transmuted into a mountain that surges upwards, revolving and growing (Olivares, 1999: figure 23). Could we say that, thrusting upwards, it reaches beyond the stars? If so, it is as if a new character, and a character very dear to us, unannounced but not unexpected, were finally revealed. And we would witness the scene of Europa, abducted and liberated, from the ode by Horace (*Odes*, Book Three, XXVII, 29-32) - "she who sought flowers in the meadows / and weaving crowns the nymphs to

please / and now, in gloomy night she looks on nought / but only stars and seas" - continuing her search, beyond the heavens and the oceans.

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