

Current European Transformations

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ABSTRACT Part of the difficulty in theorizing the current processes of transformation in contemporary Europe lies with the fact that Europe has always been more of an idea rather than a geographical or political entity. On the face of this, this article suggests some general guidelines for collecting and classifying information about the many and confusing facts that characterize these processes.

I.

Until the end of the eighties two different dimensions seemed to structurally shape Europe: State order and military pact organizations.

In Eastern Europe the system of the so-called 'Volksdemokratie' (people's democracy) and the Warsaw Treaty Organization both ruled as 'real socialism'. In Western Europe welfare capitalism and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization functioned as counterparts. Europe was thus divided into two completely different parts and the borderline was called the 'Iron Curtain'. This dichotomy characterized all other differentiations - the ethnic and the historical as well as 'minor' political ones, e.g., the not-so-neutral statuses of Austria, Switzerland, and Sweden.

Since the events of 1989— the roots of which can of course be traced back to several previous events like the unrest in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland since 1980 - the East-West dichotomy that lasted for about 40 years has apparently disappeared. The meaning of this is difficult to assess, yet some descriptive hints can be given:

Geographically Europe today denotes the area between the Barents Sea in the North, the Mediterranean Sea in the South, the Atlantic Ocean in the West, and the Ural Mountains in the East. Its population is almost 700 million people. It contains 32 entirely separate countries of which Germany is the most populous with 77 million inhabitants. The largest cities are Moscow, 9 million, and London, 7 million; whereas Europe's land area covers only 7% of the Earth, Europe's population comprises 13.5% of the Earth's total population.

II.

From a social-scientific point of view, the process of the current transformation of Europe constitutes a very complex topic. Whereas a working definition can be given for the notion of transformation, it is almost impossible to define Europe in a satisfactory manner.

Transformation denotes a process of changing social structures (stratification, beliefs and value systems), political-economic systems (types of government and state administration, organization of work and production), and regional as well as geographical borders.

What Europe means is not as clear as it appears at first glance, especially so from the perspective of one who has been socialized in the post-war period. Does the term refer only to a geographical definition? Did we have a substantively different Europe, for example, at the time of the Roman Empire when North Africa 'belonged' to Europe but Scandinavia did not? What is the convincing argument for the inclusion of the USSR west of the Urals in Europe, but the exclusion of Turkey which is not only geographically more to the west but, as an applicant to the European Community, more 'western'?

What does Europe denote in political terms? Did Europe come into existence politically immediately after World War II? Or rather, should we also include the USSR, and the USA in the political map of Europe of the time? Should we today perhaps when referring to Europe only really refer to Western Europe with its different organizations such as the Council of Ministers, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Court of Justice, and the European Council in Brussels, Geneva, and Strasbourg? Or does Europe, in effect, comprise the 'formal organization' called the European Community with its 12 member countries: namely, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany as founding members, with the later entrants of Great Britain, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Spain, and Portugal?

Historically, what was Europe in Homer's days other than Central Greece? Was the Holy Roman Empire and later the Habsburg Empire not in fact also Europe? What did it mean for Europe that by the year 1815 over 300 German states had already existed?

I would argue that Europe was always more of an idea rather than a geographical or political entity. And seen from an ethnic point of view – that being a very important one in order to understand specific national attitudes of introverted nostalgia – nearly all European nations may claim to have constituted at one time or another the core of Europe. The origin of the so-called Holy Roman Empire in the ninth century was attributed to Germany, with German kings leading the secular Europe while the popes led the ecclesiastical part. The last phase of that empire was dominated by the Habsburgs, an Austrian-Spanish dynasty. Then France held power until 1815, followed by England. Sweden also played an important part especially during the Thirty Years War. Portugal and Spain based over 200 years of power on overseas colonies. The United Kingdom under Queen Victoria was the centre for world trade as well as for industrialization. Austria-Hungary once dominated Central Europe including Lombardy-Venetia in the West, Dalmatia in the South, Transylvania in the East, and Bohemia in the North. After the Franco-Prussian War (1871) Germany was, once again, the biggest power in Europe.

It is not crass to suggest that until 1918 Europe, in its rich diversity, was the most dominating power on the globe: economically, politically, culturally, and militarily. But afterwards, the originally prolific, competitive, and conflicting diversity turned first into anarchy, creating totalitarian systems in Germany and Italy (and, to some extent, also in Austria and France); and then to the previously mentioned dichotomy seen after World War II. It would be justifiable thus to conclude that the dominant pattern of European transformation is one characterized first by diversity, then anarchy, and finally, dichotomy.

III.

It is very difficult to develop a comprehensive theory which would explain European transformation, no less difficult to define the terms themselves and try to make sense out of several centuries of diverse, and often digressive, histories and events. However, in order to gain a general guideline for collecting and classifying information about so many, and partly confusing, facts, I would suggest the following seven axioms:

- (1) We must admit that, at present, there is no appropriate comprehensive theory which sufficiently explains current European transformation.
- (2) Revolutionary transformations in Europe are not a completely new phenomenon; they are best understood as recent examples of a long and old tradition.
- (3) Transformations may be integrative, such as those currently going on in Western Europe, and/or disintegrative. The latter are at present more characteristic of the transformations taking place in Eastern Europe.
- (4) Neither do the integrative processes in Western Europe offer proof of the ultimate victory of capitalism, nor do the disintegrative processes in Eastern Europe indicate the ultimate decline of socialism.
- (5) Incorporated into the transformation processes are important manifest and latent effects which may be contradictory to each other and to some degree unknown and unpredictable.
- (6) European transformations - integrative in the West and disintegrative in the East - can be viewed, at least hypothetically, as separate, yet imperative steps in the same direction towards a global society.
- (7) Even though no theory can comprehensively explain the European transformation processes and their implications, some tendencies are easily identifiable. These are:
 - (a) ongoing individualization
 - (b) a centralization in decision making, and
 - (c) a growing dependence on each other.

I will now try to offer some very short additional explanations to each of the seven axioms.

Re(1): By 'comprehensive theory' I refer to a system of propositions that allows for the interpretation of the past and the prediction of the future in both a general and consistent fashion. If in possession of an adequate comprehensive theory, objective outcomes produce no surprises. We clearly lack such a theory. Hence, we were unable to precisely predict - i.e. with valid and reasonable arguments - whether President Gorbachev would succeed or fail; whether the USSR would be paralyzed or remain as a union.

Re(2): There is a tradition of rapid transformations in Europe. Shifts concerning borders and alliances are as old as the attempts in the late Middle Ages to define peoples' loyalties by defining political areas as principalities, kingdoms, or empires. One may consider the two regions of the Habsburgs - the Spanish and the Austrian - as relatively large vestiges of the former unity of Christianity in the Holy Roman Empire. The political instability of Europe is demonstrated by so many conquests, divisions, and new formations of areas associated with the 30-Years-War, the Napoleonic era, the Congress of Vienna 1815, the 'Crazy 1848', the French-German War of 1870-71, World War I and World War II, to mention only the most important ones.

Re(3): In a strictly logical sense 'instability' in and through transformation denotes both integrative as well as disintegrative processes. The process of integration is reflected in the process of forming the European Community in its economic,

political, and even military aspects. Originally six Western countries formed the European Community. At present the EEC encompasses twelve western, northern, southern, and even south-eastern countries; in the future it will most probably incorporate four additional Central European states: Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Even then the process of European transformation will not have come to an end. Some other countries – e.g. Turkey – have already applied for membership. The recent and spectacular unification of the two Germanies is another example of integrative processes in Europe. On the other hand, disintegration can be seen in the periphery as well as within the former ‘Eastern Block’. Forty years ago Yugoslavia had already established itself as neutral in an attempt to develop its own politico-economic system by introducing the model of worker self-management. Other former satellites of the Soviet Union were soon to follow in that direction, even if not without backlashes: Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Recently we have not only observed the dissolution of the Block as a whole, but also of a few individual states. There are strong tensions inside Czechoslovakia between the Czeches and the Slovaks. Most obvious are the ongoing breakdowns in Yugoslavia and the most recent dissolution of the Soviet Union itself.

Re(4): To interpret Eastern European transformations as a victory of capitalism and a decline of socialism seems to be incorrect, just as it was incorrect to forecast the end of capitalism as a result of the student unrests and anti-establishment activities in the US and Europe during the sixties, with some European governments at the time shifting toward ‘socialism’. One important result of this was the transformation of capitalism into ‘welfare capitalism’ with a growing public responsibility for education, health, unemployment compensation, aid to the poor and pension guarantees. In addition, it was then that the rational, functional and necessary practice of long-range planning (e.g. five years or more) became an essential characteristic of the free market system. In past decades, the idea of economic planning, i.e. of a five-year plan, was one of the defining characteristics of ‘communist’ thinking. Today we know that any investment – especially of private companies – requires long-range planning and relative social stability. Otherwise investments would be too risky and no individual or corporation would be willing to undertake the involved risks. Thus, in terms of the socio-economic reality, the former ideologies of capitalism and socialism have come together in the ‘convergence thesis’ which was asserted several decades ago.

Re(5): The convergence of those systems that were for a long time antipoles (i.e. capitalism and socialism) indicates the relativity of ideologies. Nonetheless, the transformations are concomitant with contradictions that affect real social life. For example, it was very surprising that the breakdown of the Eastern Block revealed that the economies of (former) East Germany and the Soviet Union were so poor and unstable. The consequence for the inhabitants proved more severe than expected and a lot of people had and still have strong resentments against the new-found “freedom”.

Re(6): An empirical-historical perspective when assessing the evolution of the European countries, states, and societies makes apparent the red line that Herbert Spencer drew one hundred years ago: The process of integration is concomitant with differentiation. Integration comes to denote the economic, the cultural and, to some extent, the political diffusion of banking systems, systems of transnational corporations, money exchange, computer networks, communication systems such as TV, telephone, telefax, world-wide entertainment and popular culture like American film, Coca Cola, and McDonald’s, Japanese cars and VCRs, Italian fashion, mass advertising, international athletic games, the United Nations, World Bank, OECD, and so forth. Differentiation mostly affects the division of labour: inside countries and transnational

corporations as well as between countries and the 'four worlds' on Earth. All signs seem to indicate that mankind is on the way to a global society. Integrative as well as disintegrative processes in Europe and elsewhere can be seen as distinct yet imperative steps in the same direction.

Re (7): Even though no current theory can comprehensively explain the European transformation process of integration and disintegration, one can observe some important implications and general tendencies. If it is true that there is a general, partly latent, partly manifest, evolution toward a global society, then we can look for such evolutionary tendencies in the history of the predominant type of society. That predominant model is undoubtedly that of the civil, capitalist, industrial complex.

Civil stands for the political organization of a democracy; capitalist for the notion of the re-investment of profits and the surpluses of work; industrial denotes the techniques of production; and complex indicates that all these dimensions are combined, mixed, and interdependent, representing an amalgam with synergistic effects.

Re (a): Within this conceptual framework, I conceive the tendency toward individualization as denoting that process by which someone becomes more of an 'individual' subject of formal law, of public administration, of work organization, and even of everyday life within family, culture, consumption, and leisure. Yet there is also a dialectical linkage to this process: the more the members of society are individualized and segmented, the more they are also likely to become standardized and modelled after limited types and ranges of behaviors (e.g. mass culture). One such type, for example, represents the union worker, his interests defined by the union movement of the past 100 years: more wages, more leisure time, more social security. The result is that, more or less, all have 'more of the same', hence, the standardization of individualization. This is what was meant by David Riesman's concept of *The Lonely Crowd*.

Re (b): Using profits and surpluses of work for reinvestment with the aim of capital accumulation is a well known tendency of capitalist behaviour. The central point is that production is not undertaken for the supply of use-values that will aid the reproduction and improvement of social life but, instead, in order to gain exchange-value. The goal of investment is to enlarge the equipment for even more exchange-value, i.e. money.

This capitalist mechanism has a side-effect which is perhaps less recognized but also of high social importance: corporations work on a transnational level with differentiated networks all over the globe, but with, nevertheless, centralized headquarters. What this means is that decision-making is also centralized in such a way as to emphasize the most essential parts of a company's activities *vis-à-vis* new investments, subjects of production, general policies toward employment, national governments, the marketing and corporate culture, and finally, the use of profit.

A parallel evolution of the transnational centralization of decision-making can be observed on the political level: more and more international organizations locate their headquarters in just a few cities. One consequence of these tendencies, which is also of a specific social significance, is how centralization is unavoidably accompanied by a parallel process of peripherization. The latter can be observed in the process of the disenfranchisement of citizens. Actually, even though democracy should ideally promote the political involvement of all members of a society, it often suppresses essential and substantial dimensions of direct participation and thus becomes more and more identified with 'formal' voting. Simultaneously individualization – a formerly ambitious concept of political philosophy and bourgeois ideology – is becoming empty and hollow.

Re(c): In terms of work organization industrial production has expanded all over the globe and has had some very important social consequences. The manifest consequences are the increased supply of standardized products, and the highly developed, diversified, and improved methods of utilizing physical labour and human effort. A more latent result of the ever-expanding process of industrialization and its concomitant process of centralization is the growth of social (i.e. economic, cultural, and political) dependency and interdependency. There are several dimensions to this dependency: we have become dependent on the commodities we have been socialized to use; we are more dependent on each other as we are more specialized in work, skills, and knowledge; and we are internationally more interdependent because world trade generates an international division of labour. There is no need to further illustrate this or the other aspects of the growing social interdependency – these are sufficiently evident. In light of these facts I would like to offer the following conclusion:

It is nonsense to talk of a 'post' industrial society. We have never before been less dependent on industry and industrialization (the peak of industrial production is, in fact, automated production). Industrialization is at present taking place through increasing accumulations of capital and the continued centralization of decision-making.

Recent European transformations are moving along the path of a larger global society. Industrialization is their vehicle; both individualization and interdependency constitute its dialectical effects. An analogy can be used to illustrate the relationship: namely, that of individual 'autonomous' drivers 'alone' in their cars on a busy and crowded freeway. But still, the question remains: To what destination are we all going?