

Freedom, self-determination and Equality: *New Feudalism as an Ideological Paradox*

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Introduction

Now the world – especially 'Europe' – seems to be entangled in a rather hopeless military as well as economic conflict, many wonder what perspectives remain to secure balanced peace and living conditions for nation states and their populations. Without 'protection' (or rather surveillance) by the US such balance seems hardly feasible. At least so it is presented and advocated. But how realistic are such notions? In contradiction to what is generally assumed we will argue that these orientations are still based on outdated concepts that have little to do with, or correspond to modern geopolitical and economic relations, but are primarily motivated by fears of domination and loss of sovereignty that are now outweighed by global interdependence.

Apart from all geopolitical and economic controversies, the Ukraine conflict is also the subject of a fierce battle over the underlying cultural-historical (identity) question: '*what is Europe*' and what does the '*European family*' actually encompass? Here it is important to know that through the ages, states and peoples on the European continent have tried to keep *Islam* out as much as possible. Without success though, because Islam has long been an unmistakable part of multicultural life in European countries, as it does elsewhere. But apparently this religious ideology 'didn't belong' and people wanted to keep Europe *exclusively* '*Christian*', as many fervent nationalists still proclaim in all tones. For that matter, there was relatively little room for Jewish culture either, apart from (selective) periods and regions of tolerance. The victory of the Frankish Charles Martel (Poitiers, 732) was thought to have put a stop to expansionist Islam, as was the Spanish *Reconquista* (711-1571) ¹ which eventually drove the established Islamic government there (*Caliphate of Cordoba*, 929-1031 ²) out of the country, but at the same time made it virtually impossible for Jews to continue their lives on the Iberian peninsula because of fierce persecution by the *Inquisition*. Protestants also faced bitter times in France after Louis XIV's abolition of the *Edict of Nantes* in 1685 ³ and fled (again) en masse to safer places (including the then Dutch Republic). In short, cultural *ethnocentrism* knew no bounds and, as now,



proved obstinate. *Anti-Semitism* culminated in unprecedented genocide during the Nazi dictatorship, after which *xenophobia* would continue to spread. So what about 'family'...? This (pre)supposed 'European Judaeo-Christian culture' (which Pope Francis characterizes as one big *migration* story), with its Erasmian humanist and humanitarian Enlightenment values of freedom, equality, civil rights and legalist principles such as « *every man is created equal* » ⁴ or 'people's sovereignty', turns out to be not so much an irrefutable fact but a difficult, permanent *task* on which many are gritting their teeth. In the *context of globalization*, however, we see above all a struggle over (national) *questions of freedom and equality*, which also involves significant steps backwards or making feeble 'sur places' to match rather insurmountable contradictions.

Conceptual juggling

In addition to foregoing remarks on European culture and identity and the earlier discussed regressive developments around state regulations and governance (Van der Kooij 2022 ⁵), it is important to recognise that the belief in *progress* presupposes permanent advancement, as if *feudalism* (and everything associated with it) were no longer an issue. In contrast, we encounter a series of developments that contradict and seriously impede such progress, such as *the undermining of cosmopolitanism and international law principles* and the ongoing subordination of citizens as exploitable 'subjects' to *state-capitalist* ordering structures. In short, there is a general *regressive and repressive* shift to the right. International conflicts such as the war in Ukraine are eagerly seized upon to strengthen *nationalist* sentiment and to entrench populations in their domestic sphere. In addition to this nationalistic *Welle*, there are also *problematic principles of freedom and equality* related to developments such as:

- an increasing tendency towards *autocracy* and autocratic forms of government
- *anti-democratic* tendencies
- *conservatism* and neo-Victorianism (double standards)
- *paternalism* (also with regard to the illusion of 'autonomous communities')
- financial-economic *concentration of power* (oligarchical power structures)
- *state capitalist* structures (ignoring constitutional principles of equality by governments)
- *questionable sovereignty* (in particular due to the denial of global interdependence)
- and a far-reaching *bourgeoisism*, or 'vegetative' life, involving docile adaptation, predictability (obsessive 'marking' of all stages of life), fear of stepping off the beaten track, inadequate independent 'value determination' and allowing oneself to be led by the 'vox populi').

Surely, one has to learn to 'juggle' with life's questions when one is young (but this offers no guarantees for the future, just as stacking up popularity ratings does not guarantee 'success'). In spite

of all elaborated *new moralism* there are no 'recipes' for a meaningful life, although some *distance* from all kinds of 'commotion', whether nationalistic or not, and breast-beating or self-glorification is recommendable. Simply following the crowd usually leads to disappointment on many fronts, even if the administrators anxiously try to keep all the sheep in the pen and make them stand still.

History, on the other hand, shows that anyone who considered himself 'invincible' was sooner or later brought down. Megalomania, therefore, always reaps its rewards, even if those in power think that 'deterrence' will keep opponents 'at bay'. That may offer some hope (or consolation), but in the meantime populations are constantly expected to embrace such aspirations and pay for them. With all the consequences this entails. Military expenditure is skyrocketing, arms rattling seems unstoppable and 'patriotism' is blown up to bizarre proportions. This is in stark contrast to the wry moralism about 'people's rights'.

Centuries of *feudalism* were characterised by the static subordination of populations to hierarchical power structures that were not to be trifled with. Social and economic positions were linked to 'blood relationship', with landownership initially being the decisive power factor. Later, exploitative industrial capitalism came on top of this. Although the Enlightenment and the French Revolution attempted to put an end to this feudal order and proclaimed the (political) *freedom and equality of all citizens*, the system only partially disappeared. Officially, parliamentary democracies were established, but under the surface, *inequality* on many fronts continued to grow. Parallel to progressive ideals of freedom (liberalism) and equality (socialism), both the 19th and 20th centuries were characterised by a yearning for *restorative* developments (conservatism/corporatism/nationalism). Similarly, in many Western countries, at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the political and cultural shift towards 'state capitalist' models of organisation was marked by a focus on the market, but the market and its megalomaniac financial and economic actors were increasingly financed with public money. At the expense of many *redistributive* institutional ordering structures in the public domain that societies had built up in the decades during the post-war period (*cf.* the rise of institutional *social security states*). As the world order began to exhibit more globalizing traits of interdependence – and increasing market competition *as well* – it increasingly found itself in a virtually impossible balancing act. 'Forward' or 'backward', that became the pressing question. Either the (fearful) 'flight to the front', or betting on 'national autonomy'. Both approaches, however, proved problematic, especially *in combination*. China, however, as a champion of state capitalism, knows very well how to deal with it. It is steadily building its economic empire and is (for the time being) assured of a population of billions that 'willingly' accepts repression. But China is not the only country to follow this path successfully. Numerous countries are following in its footsteps (tacitly or not), in the belief that this economic model offers the 'best guarantees' for the future.

Many, however, still believe they are free, but this freedom is increasingly proving to be a limited - while foremost consumerist and therefore highly *dependent* - (production) 'freedom' that many (such



as the 'working poor') suffer from and that they often cannot even afford. The citizen is financially and legally burdened by a myriad of issues (such as the envisaged energy transition and technological innovation) that increasingly constrict his existence and severely erode his livelihood and prospects. *Subordination* is therefore not gone as was thought, but a pregnant presence. And in many respects more so than ever, since the *denial* of hierarchical structures in particular, with reminiscences of the 'feudalism of the past', *perpetuates* this 'new' subordinate dependence of many. This is the *ideological paradox* of state capitalism, which prides itself on (economically) liberal free market principles, but at the same time relies heavily on unprecedented 'socialist' etatism. Indeed, one might say: behold the 'communist people's republic' in all its glory. What is needed, therefore, are states with state institutions that do not hand citizens over to the market, but safeguard their conditions of existence. In other words, states that abolish the *subordination of labour and capital*.

The name of the game

With all the risk calculation, 'probability richness' and 'business acumen' (shrewdness), one wonders what game is being played. Is it really such 'cleverness' as is supposed, or is it mainly a denial of everything that is indispensable for a truly humane moral position and only stands in the way of such 'cleverness'? After all, it makes quite a difference what one's 'starting capital' is and where one's 'cradle' was. Who are the 'sponsors' and to what extent are they guided by scruples or by ruthless opportunism and cynicism? Often, anything seems to be allowed in order to get hold of 'the bounty' as long as 'political correctness' is respected (at least not too openly violated) and – mainly cosmetically – lip service is paid to matters that can make a good impression. Thorough knowledge of the loopholes in the law seems a prerequisite for being able to make 'optimal' use of the loopholes (*lacunae*) in the tax system and thus to be able to 'seize opportunities' - preferably with subsidies. Rather now than later. The financial and legal 'industry' can deal with this uncompromisingly. Long-term consequences? They are of minor importance (he who lives, takes care). Why 'worry about future generations'? 'Grab that subsidy and dive headlong into those lucrative openings in the market', seems to be the moral 'entrepreneurial' adage by which many are led in the tax havens disguised as democratic states. The extensive propagandistic media industry massages the minds of potentially distressed clients and consumers. That is the result of all the energetic empowerment that drives the calculating mob to 'great heights'. Yes indeed, who could conceive such things ...

Shedding crocodile tears about the loss of 'values' and 'responsibilities' conceal the financial-economic implications of practices that are not so much guided by the interests of citizens as by the self-interests of greedy 'princes and princesses-never-enough'. The first signs of such disruption can often already be observed on the playground. Fine-tuned and calculated 'socialisation' (or what passes for it) through upbringing, education and media does the rest. After all, you either 'belong' or you do not. Standing



(on the sidelines) is not an option: make sure you are getting your (full) piece of the cake, is the motto. And so it is done, because it is simply a matter of 'using talents passionately' (which everyone obviously has). Admission tickets to the (money) spectacle are provided by the education sector, so that the tombola can run (beware to close at the back however, for there are thousands of people waiting for you). All that remains is to ensure that the correct accompanying jargon of 'newspeak' is mastered, but additional management-mentoring courses will more than suffice if required. No, we are certainly not pessimists, but we prefer to focus on the 'wealth of opportunities'. That is what gives positioning wings. Anyone who does not want to see this is a priori a 'loser' (etc.). Just try to escape this, or give it a twist. It seems to be a hopeless task. Certainly when political culture also appears to be infected with such orientations. Just look at the blunted, but nevertheless wobbly 'arguments' of government ministers and their slip carriers. Or at the embarrassing political marketing messages that are relentlessly strewn over the heads of conscientious (or well-behaved) citizens in order to coax them into docility. Indeed, a dichotomy. One of a completely different order than it is usually presented however.

What should a society make of such a paternalistic but rather double-faced and feeble culture? Pretend that nothing is wrong and only point to 'excesses' (when they can no longer be massaged/washed away) within a provision of information that appears rather perverted? This is what it often looks like in all the commotion about 'abuses' and 'mismanagement', so that subsequently many bursts of selective 'moral indignation' can freely tumble over one another. Who will point out the *structural* aspects of such aberrations in a different way than usual in political and academic circles? Mostly, it remains a case of 'voicing concerns' and 'learning from mistakes' (which should have been prevented, but were - unfortunately - 'inevitable' in the course of events...). *What* is learned and *how* this is subsequently translated into action is usually secondary. The 'good intentions' are expressed and that is usually all. On to the 'order of the day'. So nothing changes. Until the next hurdle arises. Then everything starts all over again. (And so on).

Conclusion

Human rights and the 'anthropological legacy'

Still many appear to be trapped in mouldy 'anthropological' concepts regarding a correct understanding of population communities within the *nation-state*, as continuous conflicts around Crimea and the Caucasus that have been dragging on for more than a century and a half now show. Used statements around the concept ('European', or 'Christian' or 'Russian') of 'family' are the wry exponents of this. They deny the essence of *multiculturalism* within states and assume an illusory and all-determining one-to-one 'uniformity'. The parallel international law principle of 'self-determination' completes the confusion. The recurring question is: what makes a collection of people a



community (or *society*) and to what extent can it assert *exclusive rights* and claims? Without involving **processes of state and nation formation**, the answer becomes a tricky, if not impossible task. From the moment that nomadic tribal groups of hunters and gatherers began to settle permanently and *sedentary* agricultural societies arose, not only did lifestyles change but so did the mutual relationships between inhabitants. These became more diverse, but at the same time more territorially oriented. In addition to the binding elements of kinship relations and a common language, more and more *cultural and ethnic diversity factors* were added, which led to societies becoming more *complex* entities. Feudal structures were established to keep hierarchical society organization in line. However, as the processes of state and nation building accelerated during the late Middle Ages and early modernity, *territorial conflicts* also increased in scope and intensity. These processes are characterized to this day by their predominantly *problematic* nature. After all, there are significantly *more* distinct ethnic and cultural populations and groups than there are national states. In the current conflict area around the Black Sea we see that there are a number of *historical points of reference* that all play a crucial role in answering the question of *who is entitled to what*. As there are:

- . the *Crimean War* of 1850-1853
- . the (nationalist-imperialist) run-up to and end of WWI and the collapse of the *Austro-Hungarian double monarchy*, plus the (provisional) end of the (hard-fought) *Ottoman and tsarist hegemony* over involved regions in the Balkans and Caucasus
- . the *expansion of the Soviet Union* and hegemonic claims under Stalin
- . the *Second World War* with, on the one hand, Allied cooperation and, on the other hand, the subsequently established *armed peace* (Cold War) that placed regional contrasts in a *bipolar balance of power*
- . and finally the beckoning perspective of real *self-determination* after the (formal) end of the division into power blocs (spheres of exclusive influence or 'hemispheres') between East and West.

However, this perspective was immediately thwarted by resurgent 'new' (or continued) geopolitical and nationalist antagonisms that surfaced everywhere (Middle East, Yugoslavia, former Russian republics, Caucasus region, etc.).

The choice of a *form of state and government* (autocracy or democracy) – as well as the question of who is entitled to dispose of it on behalf of whom – is one thing, *territorial issues* are of an entirely different nature. Sovereignty rights may be linked to international recognition of states, but national states and their territories have come about in a highly capricious and rather unpredictable manner. With a reference to (and an appeal to) the (alleged) 'Volkseigene', these kinds of issues become rather 'fluid' and one soon finds oneself in a twilight zone of international law. It turns out that the concepts «Nation-State» and «People» are a highly controversial combination and that the notorious (national-socialist) 'Heim ins Reich' that has caused so much indescribable misery is not only an impossible



construction and ahistorical concoction, but is also – still – extremely brisker that can blow up nationalist moods to bizarre proportions. Those who do *not* accept that states and societies are *diverse, pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multicultural* remain the prisoners of themselves and of power-hungry others. Bound to 'Blut und Boden' therefore remains an extremely dangerous means of identification and a dead end. As a result, populations will always remain 'outlaws' and adrift. Without breaking free from this dark 'anthropological legacy' it will remain a case of 'fight and flight', however much mankind (rightly) longs for a secure and lasting existence in which it is left in peace. In order to achieve this, however, quite a few beacons will have to be changed. Not least *cultural-psychological* ones. Only then will «human rights» be able to acquire a real-realistic content. Not before. The conflict Putin-Zelensky et al. comprises both sides of the nationalistic thinking with which they are hopelessly entrenched. 'Ukraine' is thus anything but an isolated case and shows that there is still a lot of work to be done in the 'modernity store' that transcends military-strategic claims to power. Those who wish to act in a solution-oriented manner will, in short, above all have to delve deeply into the *mechanisms and structures* that drive and sustain nationalist sentiments and sovereignty conflicts. In this respect, there is still a long way to go before this 'new' but regressive geopolitical and nationalistic feudalism and all its consequences can be dismantled, in order to give way to real progress.

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Notes

¹ The various *Crusades* (1096-1272) were part of this.

² This *Caliphate* was notable for a tolerant blend of Arab-Islamic, Christian and Jewish culture at that time.

³ The *Edict of Nantes* of 1598 had come about as a result of the massacre of the Huguenots ('Bartholomy Night', 1572).

⁴ This passage from the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776), like the *American Constitution* (1789) refers to European *Enlightenment values and principles*. The American founding fathers thus showed themselves to be indebted to conceptions that were not so much 'exclusively' American as they had European origins, just as it was personally the case with countless American immigrants. The fact that Americans often speak pityingly about 'the old continent' as if American culture and way of life represents the ultimate 'avantgarde' is therefore a rather blunt and far-fetched demonstration of misplaced complacency. This attitude is first and foremost a legacy of the historically delivered battle against *Old Albion* – or big brother England – with its feudal traditions and rigid culture of rank and file. « *No taxation without representation* » was indeed the starting shot and the basic principle of this fight for independence, although the *Dutch Republic* had preceded the U.S. in this with the abdication of the king of Spain centuries earlier (*Acte van Verlatinghe*, 1581).

⁵ Van der Kooij, H. *Seven plagues of the 'Permanent State of Unrest and Disintegration'*, ISSR Apr. 2022

