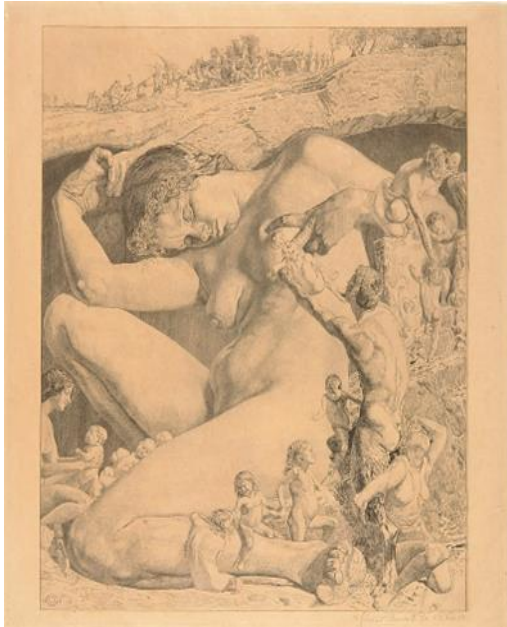


The European deficit: *the Occident is turning out the lights*

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—discussion paper—

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'Gaia' – personification of Mother Earth and Goddess of War by Otto Greiner (1912) | The Daulton Collection



Bernard d'Agesci (Augustin Bernard), *L'enlèvement d'Europe* (1785) (The abduction of Europe) | Musée de Niort

What is the matter with living conditions in the modern world of today in which persistent enemy images continue to dominate international politics and hamper effective human policies? While *Gaia* is in turmoil and out of balance and people all over the world are continuously suffering from deprivation, exploitation and lawlessness, warfare and unbridled exercise of power is still immanent and omnipresent. However in the western world not only gas taps are shut off and houses are being sealed hermetically towards sterile living quarters, but especially life in the European version of *Disneyland* as such is becoming increasingly bizarre. What once was the cradle of *Enlightenment and reason*, there now reigns fear and despair. Many people have lost their purpose and direction and wander around self-spun labyrinths in which all reasonableness seems lost. Europeans unwittingly but docile join those who are fighting rearguard battles on the assumption that this means belonging to the 'avant-garde'. This avenges itself not only in politics, but also in cultural and social life. Much epigonism, mediocrity, endless repetition of moves and pointless regressive entrenchment characterize this orientation. Closed minds within an *Alice-in-Wonderland* syndrome with which one gleefully but rather gullibly views the wide (incomprehensible) world and believes that everything can be reduced to manageable proportions with a little good will, kills any feasible realism. The exploitation of (cheap) sentiment has become all-consuming. Ambivalent morals are inexorable: 'right-wrong' schemes are pushed to absurd heights as if Bush Jr. were still in power. But what really is 'right' or 'wrong' remains highly questionable and surrounded by debatable notions about life being considered 'politically right'. As a result, the *moral compass* has also been lost. 'Apollo' has been replaced by a small-town petty-bourgeois 'Dionysos'. Provincialism reigns supreme, so it seems.

Does this point to an «*Untergang*» in the Spenglerian sense? ⁱ No -not yet-, but surely an unmistakable '*Abstieg*' [overall decline]. There is no need to be lulled into lethargic cultural pessimism, but some intellectual maturity would certainly not be out of place for the European citizen, especially in the face of all the tidings of doom. Instead, however, one wanders between hope and fear, and quite a few of the 'vistas' presented turn out to be vain hopes. This only increases despair.

Wheeling and dealing

What is the problem with 'European identity'? It has everything to do with living in (dis)parallel worlds, which most people find hard to comprehend. Or «*fluid identities*» as Bauman defines it, linking this concept to a *problematic* (split, or disparallel) *modernity* that he thereby places at the center of his follow-up to Eisenstadt. ⁱⁱ The core of this is that the development of modernity is surrounded by numerous dilemmas and paradoxes in which it is difficult to find a way. Against this background, linear concepts of progress are completely out of place. Yet people cling to them, even in an eschatological sense. However, the 'inevitable outcome' of all efforts is by no means certain. Not in a positive sense, but not in a negative sense either. Everything depends on *choices* that are made or neglected. After all that is what politics is all about. These do not involve 'natural phenomena' or laws, but *human decisions* that can be as debatable as they are fallible. There are *always* alternatives, even if one suggests otherwise. An *apolitical* stance masks the 'own right' that, while often pretended otherwise, turns out to be far from tenable. If one fears contestation, yes one prematurely entrenches oneself to avoid potentially 'uncomfortable confrontations'. A fallacy. Such an ostrich mentality will not last long, given the current awakening realism (or at least what passes for it) that characterizes populations *in spite of* everything else. This troubles and threatens the positions of the ones that complacent cling to the status quo. They must therefore be defended and maintained with all one's might if it is up to the people in charge.

But one does not get off that easily anymore. Many things shift, evidently not for the better in all respects, but still. Continuing to insist on 'cohesion' is the worst possible answer. Given all the fragmentation, this no longer exists (if it ever did). The 'solutions' that are devised for problematic societal issues will therefore have to be viewed and assessed extremely critically. Whichever they may be and whatever their source. After all, our *raison d'être* depends on it. This applies not least to the *refugee issue* that the EU mistakenly thinks it can 'regulate' by blindly throwing billions around (Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt). All this stems from the delusion that these problems are limited to a few exclusively demarcated borders. How unworldly can one be... . So is the way one assumes environmental issues or international crime should be approached. Global problems are not bound by borders, even if we still cling to outdated nationalist sovereignty schemes. After all, this 19th-century model of the world order has long since proven to lead to extensive *Abstieg*. And certainly not only in militaristic terms.

On the other hand, the current EU order as it has functioned in practice for years does not offer any solace against globalization either, so that the continued *conception of state-sovereignty*, including all the ultra-nationalist ideas associated with it, continues to bite its own tail. *Nationalism* therefore seems virtually ineradicable and should give all who care about increasing far-right orientations reason to think further than a blunt left-right dichotomy. People circle around each other in a rather narrowminded political way, but this *danse macabre* will break many if they continue to close their eyes to these mechanisms - and especially if they do fail to formulate answers to the related questions. The EU leadership is not in the right hands, that much is clear. The Union allows itself to be blackmailed and bullied unwillingly and this must be stopped. After all, all the billions that are thrown around

remain citizens' money, and they do indeed have *other* interests than the cashing of uncovered checks to pay for numerous illusory political ambitions. If democracy were functioning properly, this would be stopped immediately. But rather than that, policy officials look the other way and imagine themselves superior to all those who sound the alarm and warn of the consequences of such failures. The elections are approaching, but the aberrations are numerous and persistent. Problems simply cannot be bought off in a way that leaves everything unchanged and fails to locate and address causes. This was painfully experienced not only by Dutch PM Rutte, but appears also to be a continuous problem for EU chief Von der Leyen and consorts. Time for *true realism* in politics one would say. In all respects. Because the world-constellation, like nature, cannot be captured so easily in black and white diagrams and will certainly not be modeled after illusory dream images. If one does not realize this, citizens are left with countless meaningless phrases that will continue to overshoot the mark and only serve in vain to 'reassure' the troubled mind. With that one may want to think oneself 'senang' [comfortable], but it remains a display of impotence. The 'lights' certainly do not have to go out, but continuing in the same shadowy manner will irrevocably lead to darkness. Whoever, in short, carelessly extinguishes the torch of humanitarianism bears a heavy responsibility.

The demagogic universe

Meanwhile, acts of war continue to dominate people's minds, both around Gaza and Ukraine. But whatever one may think about the war in these areas, support for the war remains controversial because highly politically charged. Not only in humanitarian, but certainly in geopolitical terms as well. This is contrary to what some suggest, namely that this conflict and in particular the support to Ukraine following the 'official' government position would (or should) be 'undebatable'. This is apolitical nonsense because, contrary to what Navo-adepts suggest, the Netherlands nor the Union is formally at war. Such demagogic bigotting can be sorely missed. Time after time, as is the case with all issues, trade-offs will have to be made. Opposition must remain possible at all times. Whoever or whatever it concerns. War is not a mechanism that should be followed blindly - whichever side one may sympathize with - but this phenomenon should be constantly viewed critically and with the necessary skepticism. States are not war machines and should not be reduced as such. Not by terrorists and not by war-mongers. Moreover, when political parties declare beforehand that they will torpedo all proposals of a new cabinet to be formed in which policy-critical groups participate, they are committing democratic obstruction of a dubious kind. After all, where were they when the Rutte-clan ruled the Netherlands? Right! Parties joined in and supported erosion policies in no small measure. Trying to make 'good cheer' during the current formation talks by crying foul before even a single policy proposal has been put on the table is not only hypocritical, but above all stupid and short-sighted. Because the many social problems including the increased inequality that have arisen under the responsibility of successive neoliberal coalitions *will have to be addressed* no matter what. Not only in the Netherlands, but also elsewhere. And wasn't this precisely what social democratic parties were once founded to do, but which are failing to live up to in many countries? Constantly playing the game of 'high morality', but grossly failing to practice what they preach. This runs the risk that the policy of demolition will continue unabated. Did you really think that these parties are in such a hurry for new policies? No, those are just smokescreens. Despite the fact that many politicians look at the electorate with disdain, the electorate has spoken unambiguously and this will be no different in the upcoming EU elections. For the time being however, both nationally and internationally everything that the electorate has resolutely rejected can be surreptitiously rushed through. Such voters are therefore completely ignored. Where there is talk of a 'chasm' it is better to speak of a ravine, or even an abyss.

What is the reason for all this alarming (but relative apparent) resignation while plutocratic policies are being cynically and haughtily pushed through as if 'the citizen' did not exist, one might ask. Here the long-running *depoliticization* process plays a not insignificant role. The misplaced euphoria about the 'de-ideologization' supposedly involved when the *Cold* (but fiercely ideological) *War* in favor of the West *seemed* to have ended is still – and even more than ever – taking its toll. The *Bush-doctrine* was the apotheosis of this. To this day, this doctrine dominates geopolitical relations and undermines all serious attempts to achieve a true balance of power(s). Whether dictators and terrorists are raging or not. Peace and security seem further away than even under the Cold War conditions of yore.

'Bella vi(s)tas'

How to turn this tide – and most importantly: *can* this tide be turned? Contrary to what some believe, there is no 'conspiracy' of a deep state in the literal sense, but there are compelling *mechanisms and structures* that feed and give wings to conspiracy thinking. For example, there is the longstanding military-industrial complex that pulls side by side with the financial world and largely determines national and international policy. In addition, there is the adage that if policy goals are good (or are found to be 'correct'), almost all means are permitted and justified. Thus, under the headings of 'safety', 'innovation', 'public health', 'economic progress' and 'cohesion', all sorts of issues and measures are grouped together that, although covered with 'the cloak of love', can remain highly questionable. However, the unhindered implementation of measures is sacrosanct. For example, NATO apparently does not want a truthful and balanced statesman or woman as supreme chief, but prefers a bureaucratic sharpshooter as a willing and uncritical executor of its policies. In this regard, outgoing Dutch cabinet chief Rutte is the ideal candidate given his years of demonstrated docile and monomaniacal attitude toward American economic and defense interests. With serious consequences for the interests of Dutch society, that is. Principles of law were violated, the public domain was neglected, citizens were unlawfully persecuted, parliament was disrespected and billions were taken from the public purse without a proper mandate. Truly no small matter. Hence, voters massively withdrew the governing mandate for his ruling club. The curtain had long since fallen and therefore his departure from office remained just a mere formality. With this political sphinx, however, the United States can freely continue its grip on Europe and, if possible, expand it at will. After all, without Europe, the U.S. is a giant on mud feet even if they collectively imagine themselves to be an unbeatable 'Titan'.

However, the model of national sovereignty which the established institutional intergovernmental (or communitarian) cooperation in Europe was intended to establish and preserve and which has been obstructing dynamic policy for decades now, will continue to cause problems for the Alliance. For although one may want to count oneself rich in geostrategic interests and believe that everything is a 'done deal', the differences between the member states and their various populations are – certainly subcutaneous, but increasingly on the surface – greater than suggested. Contrary to what the European citizen is constantly being told, Europe is not at war, nor should it allow itself to be talked or trickled into a war. Conflicts should not be approached a priori with the clash of arms, but with sensible *de-escalating* policies. That offers more prospects for peace and security than the unbridled ramping up of defense capabilities and the propagation of a continuous war mood and mentality. Many have had more than enough of this.

Whatever the case - 'Occident' or not - the grapes remain sour for the 'transition' entrepreneurs and apparatchiks whose dreamy visions have failed and who will have to bite their nails for the time being. Whatever one may claim about the 'business climate', the money-guzzling subsidy tills are closing as far as the majority of the electorate is concerned and 'jobs elsewhere' are then the (not so) beckoning perspective for many market protagonists. The unlimited looting of citizens will have to be done elsewhere, but no longer in the Netherlands as a tax haven for greedy shareholders and their assistants. The EU too will have to change course drastically if it is to have any right to exist at all. Complacency is not the way to go, just as judicialization of legislative implementation is not the appropriate path either. Policy agendas need to be rigorously revised. Let it sink in.

Rearguard strategies and the democratic deficit

The European Union behaves as a lame duck instead of an serious entity that could make a significant difference among global relations. This is mainly due to an attitude which floats on a dependent state of mind and which allows third parties to intervene bluntly and to decide what is best for European citizens. After the UK already turned away from the continent with *Brexit*, the rest of Europe is now risking going down the same unsound path and putting its *roots* to waste for the sake of questionable 'earning models'.

In summary, like the Netherlands, the EU has allowed itself to be reduced to a vehicle of NATO and US foreign (defence) policy in which foreign corporations have been given free rein. EU citizens are only marginally involved. They have to contend with a vote for the European Parliament, which has virtually no opportunities to *substantially* influence (let alone determine) policy, as the European Commission together with the Council (of Ministers) pretty much pulls all the strings. The idea that the EU pursues democratically legitimised 'independent' politics and that citizens' interests would come first is therefore rather misplaced. Whether Rutte, as intended NATO chief, will hold this position as widely advocated or not, it will not change this in any way, as he has already demonstrated as prime minister for quite some time that he is an uncritically compliant executor of overseas interests. Thus, the EU will slide even further into geopolitical encapsulation. What remains is only lip service (and the furnishing of many billions) to secondary issues and selective interests. Resulting in a huge amount of opaque and corruption-prone bureaucracy. However, adhesion to this will crumble proportionately and only further increase nationalism. This is not a 'win-win situation', but a *lost battle* in more ways than one. European *cohesion* and the possibilities of pursuing *common policies* that actually make sense and have meaning are disappearing fast. The EU as a US sidecar is the last thing one should want given the steady *Abstieg* due to decades of neoliberal mismanagement in many (European) countries. In the US, the middle class has virtually disappeared and poverty and inequality are rampant. The same is also happening in many a European country. Socio-economic *Rhineland models* ⁱⁱⁱ are no longer considered relevant and this has been the source of many problems for a long time. The pioneering role in terms of a balanced peace and security policy has also long since been lost. Apparently to the delight of frantic 'hawks', but also to the chagrin of many others. Time will tell what this has ultimately created. The stalemate into which the Union has allowed itself to be manoeuvred is miles away from the enormous *potential* it could exhibit in humanitarian and peace terms to achieve more moderate geopolitical relations. With this *disregard*, it disqualifies itself in no small measure on the world stage despite all its cosmetic demonstration of 'progressiveness' and 'vigour'.

Lessons of life

Create-preserve-destroy, that is the trinity that characterizes and determines the course of (world) history and which was already being recounted in the earliest times. 'Creation' encompasses the domain of inventive innovation that replaces the old but can also destroy it, so that 'conservation' is the order of the day if it involves interests that one wants to preserve at all costs. Both can lead to 'destruction' if the situation deteriorates into thoughtless rigidity. What is necessary and needed, what can be missed and is better left for what it is - these are questions that crop up again and again and are on the agenda when one is possessed by the (relentless) urge for change. 'Time' cannot be caught, just as 'change' often leads a life of its own. With everything that man imagines, one may wonder whether he is sufficiently equipped to take *up* such matters in a sensible way. Especially when we consider the (recent) course of diverse developments and events. The present juncture is characterized more by trial and error (or rather: spinning in circles), than by energetic and well-considered action. Thinking and doing are far apart. All the euphoria about 'the new' often turns out to be misplaced, because characterized by *regression* and/or repetition of moves. The truly creative element is thus outstripped by conservation. But an attitude of conservation that tends not so much toward (meaningful) continuity as toward (unwilling) destruction. We therefore live not only in uncertain, but especially in extremely paradoxical times.

Was that not always the case? one may argue. Yes, anyone who is familiar with history and looks at the course it has taken must come to such a conclusion. However, it should be clear that there is by no means an unambiguous linear development '*for the better*'. Creation and destruction are simultaneously linked and lead parallel lives. Is that then a reason to lay our heads down and watch idly? By no means. But *idealism* that is insufficiently rooted will offer no solace, just as *pragmatism* can overshoot the mark and turn into cynical denial. We know many examples of this. Hope, despair, vain hope, thwarted and unfulfilled expectations, persisting against one's better judgment, proceeding with the courage of despair – all these orientations characterize human inability (or shortcoming, if you will). We would have to deal with that, one would think, were it not for the fact that it is certainly possible to rise higher if one knows how to set one's sights correctly, does not follow false prophets and does not allow oneself to be dragged into the luxury problems of the powerful. That could already make a big difference and certainly *need not* be a vain hope.

Will humanity work out after that? Let's stick with 'arduous progress' which can only prove to be a measure of progress *after* much has been lost. But then again. Those who prematurely count themselves rich will perish in *oblivion*. For now, one does not get much further than the harsh consolidation of positions of power with all its destructive consequences, as has so often been the case. Therefore, until new power relations are established, there will be little new on the horizon. But that surely will require 'some inventiveness'. '*Fiat lux; longa via est*' (or: there is light, but the road is long and full of pitfalls). Woe to us mortals who allow ourselves to be blinded by false light and tinsel, and beware of persons who imagine themselves '*biggus dickus*'.^{iv}

Concluding remark

Calling for peace is not identical to taking sides in war conflicts, even if it is 'only' put forward 'an Argentine' (a.k.a. Pope Francis, Easter 2024) as some coldly and cynically think they can claim. This is a great but persistent misconception that undermines any attempt at more *humanitarian relations*. This 'Argentine' truly has a bit more to say than many a war monger who thinks he is on the right side or in 'good company' with such statements. It is precisely these abject ideas, including all the framing

around them, that cause and perpetuate so much needless (additional) misery. Solidarity and compassion should always *benefit* the victims and not be held hostage by selective indignation. Power politics is of all times. To pretend that this is restricted to a few brutes is far from the truth.

But is selflessness, self-sacrifice, martyrdom on the other hand the highest good? We would say that *compassion* should be the central value and highest standard. No one needs to voluntarily bury their head or allow themselves to be maltreated willy-nilly. But also allowing oneself to be led by 'politically correct' interests and to be dragged along by utterly selective agendas is not the appropriate way to achieve such humanity. The norms and values that are *proportionally* applied determine all attempts to achieve balanced relations. One should stand squarely behind the call for peace and disarmament instead of distancing oneself from it haughtily. Whether it comes from the pontifex as spiritual leader of the Church of Peter and Paul or not. The argument that this would not help in any way is a fallacy. For as long as minds remain unilaterally focused on 'victory', such victory will remain an illusion. ('Arms and plowshares' you remember ...) . What matters, therefore, is not whether people are 'virtuous' or not, but whether they are of good will and know *how to effect this* as such. Only then will it become clear what becomes of all 'good intentions'. The world may look beautiful from the *Olympus*, but it is still a long way to get there.

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Notes and references

ⁱ Spengler, O. *Der Untergang des Abenlandes*, München C.H. Beck (1918/1922)

ⁱⁱ Bauman, Z. *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press 2000; Eisenstadt, S.N. *Multiple Modernities*, Daedalus Vol. 129, Nr.1, 2000, pp. 1-29

ⁱⁱⁱ With the so called *Rhineland-model* social security states were established in various European countries like the Netherlands and others that differed institutionally from the Anglo-saxon model which was merely characteristic for the United Kingdom. Although this model is long gone in the way it functioned for decades, constitutionally guaranteed living conditions were at its core. With the *neoliberal cultural and policy shift* of the 1980s and 1990s severe cuts were made in institutional *social security and the public domain*, the bitter fruit of which many citizens have been reaping for so long until the present day. There is hardly any reason for complacency or euphoria as far as these policy matters are concerned. Boasting about 'progress' is therefore unfounded and quite demagogic. Especially for social democratic parties and politicians who unscrupulously sold their souls to the market (such as former p.m's W. Kok in the Netherlands, G. Schröder in Germany and T. Blair in the UK). With that, neoliberals were handed their wishes on a silver platter and, following the American example, could aim their arrows at the '*intervening state*'. This became the overall *mainstream* policy in the European Union as a whole, with which European institutions paradoxically turned to unwanted and counterproductive *in-depth interference* in numerous private affairs of citizens. This ambiguous duality characterizes the nature of the Union in many ways.

^{iv} 'Biggus Dickus' was a reference to the Roman Emperor Tiberius from Monty Python's 1979 feature film *The Life of Brian* made by Pontius Pilate (Michael Palin) during the imprisonment of the main character 'Brian Cohen' (Graham Chapman) who was mistakenly held for the Messiah.