AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

EUROPE, WHAT CAN IT TEACH US?[1]

Nikita Dhawan

"Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. [...] where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind. [...]. Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth."

Fanon 1961: 251

BETWEEN EUROCENTRISM AND EUROPHOBIA

In his Vienna lecture titled "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity", Edmund Husserl diagnosed a calamity inflicting Europe of which Nazism was merely a symptom, such that only complete reconfiguration of Europe would avert an otherwise inevitable misfortune. Husserl clarifies that when he speaks of Europe, he does not limit it to a geographical, historical, cultural, political, or economic entity, rather Europe is the pursuit of universal rational science. In his view it is a project that is not just Europe's struggle to understand itself; rather it is informed by an impetus towards reshaping all of humankind in the spirit of universal reason (Husserl 1996 [1936]: 6). Europe is imagined as an all-embracing project that defines relations among individuals and groups in light of what it means to be human rather than in terms of a particular linguistic or ethnic identity (ibid: 14). As a promise and telos that transcends European borders, this project not only concerns Europe, but affects all of humankind. Insofar as this project fosters the emergence of universal bonds of humanity, it is the driving force behind the idea of Europe that sets Europe apart from other civilizations of the world. Husserl does concede that other cultures are also inter-

ested in world-encompassing ideas and proffer grand narratives (ibid: 280). However, in his view, non-European perspectives are largely mythical-religious and are anchored in particular traditions and practices, which prevent them from becoming universally valid (ibid: 283). In contrast, the European pursuit of universal humanity is divested of everything particular, thereby becoming authoritative and gaining legitimacy. Husserl argues that Europe is furnished with a self-awareness that is historically unique and unparalleled. In his view, Europe bears responsibility for "the Europeanisation of all foreign part of mankind" *(die Europäisierung aller fremden Menschheiten)* (ibid: 16), which would entail the spreading of European norms and values to the non-European world.

It is interesting to note that the name "Europe" is proposed by the Greeks, who are generally characterized as the birthplace of European culture, although paradoxically the Greeks did not consider themselves European (Gasché 2009: 9-10). "Europe" signifies the onset of darkness after the sun has gone down, designating the land of the evening *(Abendland)* in contrast to the Orient *(Morgenland),* where the sun rises. It is ironical that Europe understands itself through a name that it has inherited from non-European origins, wherein Europe comes to itself from outside itself.

Husserl is not alone in thinking of Europe as exceptionally equipped to pursue the universal project of embracing all of humanity. Although Europe is accused of exploiting and oppressing the rest of the world, it is claimed that its tradition of self-critique and self-evaluation enables Europe to reflect upon its crimes and failures and to self-correctively emerge more ethical and responsible. This special critical tradition is repeatedly celebrated in all the grand discourses on Europe by Europeans. Europe's practice of questioning itself is considered its greatest strength and the most significant legacy of European Enlightenment, which sets it apart from other cultures, who are deemed incapable of self-critique. The imperative of relating in a critical fashion to oneself and the ensuing self-improvement in thought and action is proclaimed to be singularly and uniquely European.

As a project that takes on the task of pursuing universality, European thought, according to its postcolonial critics, is thoroughly Eurocentric. In staging itself as exemplary, Europe seeks to impose its specific norms universally. The distinctive European ability to "civilize" the world by imposing its capital, commodities, ideas, and values on other cultures, can only be celebrated, if the coercion and violence that accompanied these practices is disavowed. The paradox of Europe's self-perception as a "civilizing force" is that this positive self-assessment is only possible through historical amnesia about the costs of this mission in the form of slavery, exploitation, plunder and genocide in

---

the colonies through military, material and epistemic violence. Despite these shameful legacies, the postcolonial critique of Europe and the concomitant efforts to "provincialize Europe" are met with suspicion and misgiving. Already Husserl accused critics, who censure universal discourses as Eurocentric, of being guilty of "lazy reason" (1996 [1936]: 16). In a similar vein, postcolonial scholars, who judge Europe and Europeans of grave crimes against humanity, are blamed for essentializing Europe as a homogeneous power of domination. In condemning Europe, postcolonial critics are reproached for over-simplifying and over-generalizing Europe. In my view, the accusation of "Europhobia" against postcolonial critique is a misbegotten effort to deflect attention from the extremely crucial intervention of postcolonial scholars in the self-congratulatory project called "Europe". Inspired by the first generation of the Frankfurt School and the poststructuralist critique of European Enlightenment, postcolonial theorists emphasize the profound interconnection between Europe's imperial ventures and the Enlightenment veneration of reason, science, and progress that made possible the very thinking of the world as a unified whole. These "world-knowing" and "world-creating" strategies were at the heart of European colonialism. Imperialist ideologies were successful in translating their provincial understanding of knowledge, norms, values, and ideals into explanatory paradigms with universalist purchase. The universalizing project of European Enlightenment imposed a uniform standard of instrumental reason, privileging European conceptions of knowledge and institutions. The Enlightenment reform of legal, administrative, and economic policy in European colonies, instead of ushering in freedom and equality, opened a new chapter of the history of domination. Against this background, the universal aspirations of European Enlightenment and its faith in the power of reason are undeniably tainted by this history of terror and violence. The glorifying narratives about Europe disregard the coercive context in which Europeans emerged as ethical subjects in the guise of redeemers of the "backward" people and dispensers of freedom, rights and justice. Unfortunately, as long as Europe and Europeans are unable and unwilling to learn from their historical mistakes, failures and crimes, they are condemned to repeat them.

THE SELF-BARBARIZATION OF EUROPE

In his book "The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe", Jacques Derrida observes that Europe has always tended to consider itself as the "cultural capital" (from *caput,* head) of the world, namely, as providing a lead for "world civilization or human culture in general" (Derrida 1992: 24ff.). The role of "norm-producer" (whether legal or socio-cultural) that Europe has historically arrogated itself implies that what is considered to be good for Europe is also good for the rest of the world. This conviction is accompanied by a pronounced sense of mission that Europe-

ans have the responsibility to dispense freedom, rights and justice worldwide. Europe as guarantor of world peace and democracy marks a continuity of the "white man's burden", namely, the responsibility and obligation of the Europeans to "save" and "enlighten" the rest of the world. According to this logic, European intervention was and is legitimized as a liberating process and any form of resistance is read as a sign of barbarity against the forces of freedom and democracy, a rejection of European Enlightenment and as an expression of ingratitude vis-à-vis the good-heartedness of transmitters of peace and justice, which further justifies brutal suppression of any resistance. Racial discrimination, cultural subordination and economic exploitation of non-Europeans was and is legitimized in the name of doing good for the world by promoting progress and development as well as protecting equality, freedom and liberty. According to this reasoning natives, who are moral and rational, are automatically favourably inclined toward Western intervention.

European claims to global leadership in the areas of justice and human rights are based on the assertion of moral and military superiority. This claim to leadership is at the heart of most Western countries' foreign policy legitimacy, which determines the standard for what is right and righteous. The dispensers of justice arrogate themselves the "normative power" to decide what is "fair" and "legal", with those at the receiving end of justice and rights being simply reduced to "norm consumers". A notion of ethical responsibility emerges at the juncture between acting and being acted upon, whereby Europe monopolizes agency in the name of protecting and exerting responsibility. In turn, the gratitude that is expected (and sometimes received) from those whose wrongs have been righted by elite moral do-gooders is a ruthless reminder of how the formal transfer of power from colonial rulers to native elites has not resulted in the decolonization of either the global South or the global North.

As pointed by postcolonial scholars, the fundamental impediment in decolonizing Europe is its inability to approach the non-European world in a non-Orientalist and non-hierarchical manner. This challenge is simultaneously economic, ethical, political, psychoanalytical and philosophical. It is also marked by a reluctance to acknowledge that the very fabric of the European is made up of its relation to what is deemed as "non-European". For instance, when Jürgen Habermas (1987), following Kant, links the flourishing of coffee houses and salons with the emergence of deliberative democracy in Europe, he fails to mention the exploitative and dehumanized conditions under which coffee, sugar and tobacco were produced for European consumption in these respectable bourgeois public spheres. It is fitting to remember Fanon's remark that "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World" (1961: 58). Europe's continued historical illiteracy is accompanied by its repeated betrayal of Enlightenment principles of equality, fraternity, humanity, democracy and justice. Both scholars of Postcolonial Studies as well as Holocaust Stud-

ies question the hollow myth of Europe's long march to freedom and emancipation and outline a certain "disenchantment" with the idea of Europe. They mistrust Europe's self-representation as guardians of the Enlightenment. This self-congratulatory stance is contested by bringing to light Europe's self-barbarization in the form of colonialism and fascism.

In my view, if Europe truly wants to be a source of normative legitimacy, it needs to take this critique seriously and acknowledge its historical *Schuld* towards it other. In *The Geneaology of Morals* Friedrich Nietzsche outlines the delicate interplay between debt and guilt, the doubleness that marks the German word *Schuld.* Drawing on Nietzsche, Derrida argues that debtors and creditors are inextricably bound to each other, so that giving gifts and incurring debts are two sides of the same coin. Against the backdrop of the entangled legacies of colonialism and the Holocaust, there is an urgent need to revisit the legacy of debt and guilt that haunts Europe.

EUROPE TO COME

In a much publicized interview on the Greek debt crisis, the star economist Thomas Piketty[2] shames Germany for never having repaid its debts and thus being guilty of historical amnesia. He emphasizes that while Germany is an excellent example of a country that never repaid its external debt, neither after the First nor the Second World War, it frequently made other nations pay up. In Piketty's view, Germany and the Germans have profited immensely from being released from discharging their debts, namely, from the generosity of receiving the gift of debt relief, which they deny others today. Piketty reminds us that Europe was founded on the principle of debt forgiveness. Although in the case of colonialism Europe is yet to acknowledge its debt to the former colonies, even as Europe seems to have conveniently forgiven its own unpaid debt/guilt. And yet it expects gratitude from the non-European world when it comes to Europe's role in the fields of refugee crisis, humanitarian intervention and development aid, all of which still bear traces of orientalism.

Historical debts, however, are not a matter of a simple tallying of balance sheets, but a duty beyond what is due. It is interesting to see how some debts are withheld and opportunistically forgotten, while others are paid and collected with interest. Against the backdrop of colonialism and the Holocaust, the question of European (ir)responsibility must be rethought and Europe's (in)ability to respond to the provocation of history needs to be addressed. This legacy of *Schuldlast* – burden of debt/guilt – is inconvenient, albeit unavoidable. The historically inherited debt-guilt demands a "pure giving" that, as Derrida (2005: 148-149) tells us, is both impossible and inevitable, for it oscillates between an obligation to give and giving out of obligation, which is no longer "pure". Till Europe acknowledges its histor-

2   www.zeit.de/2015/26/thomas-piketty-schulden-griechenland/komplettansicht

ical indebtedness there is no hope for an ethical relation between Europeans and non-Europeans. An economy of debt and guilt continues to bind these two parties on both ends of the postcolonial divide in an unequal and mutually hostile relationship. If, however, Europe is able and willing to learn from history, the forging of a post-imperial Europe would be a chance and opportunity for a democratic iteration of Europe. This "Europe to come" would be responsible towards the principles of the Enlightenment, while being critical of its colonial legacies. Inheritance, for Derrida (2005: 9), is not about being dogmatically attached to tradition or a sentimental relation to what we inherit. Indeed to inherit does not entail a simple affirmation of what is bestowed on us; rather inheritance calls upon us to act responsibly by both preserving as well as transforming what has been passed onto us. An ethical relation to the European past is indispensable for a future Europe, for a Europe to come. The task consists in a double movement of being dedicated to the idea of Europe as well as questioning it so as to not repeat the historical violence committed in its name.

Europe today is caught between no longer and not yet. The democratizing forces at work seem to be constantly haunted by brutal nationalisms, racisms, and exclusions. The non-Europeans pose a challenge to Europe as a reminder and remainder of colonialism. Europe must face up to the choice between continuing its former trajectory of claiming moral, economic and military superiority vis-à-vis the non-European world or it can rise to the challenge of developing another Europe by being responsible and respectful to difference and alterity.

The experiment with an altered Europe would entail fostering what Derrida calls autoimmunity in the form of a self-deconstruction of Europe. Derived from biology, autoimmunity refers to those elements that turn something against its own defense through a form of radical contamination. However, autoimmunity is not a disorder, rather it is strength but also vulnerability that is built into an entity. The autoimmune implies that the subject guards and exposes itself, protects and endangers itself, preserves and compromises itself (2005: 40). It is thus both self-destroying and self-protecting, poison and counter-poison (ibid: 123). For instance, during the recent refugee crisis, some of the EU countries reinstated border control and temporarily regulated free mobility of both its citizens and non-citizens. One of the founding principles of the EU was thus compromised in order to protect and secure Europe. In safeguarding itself, Europe turns on itself and takes on traits of its supposed enemies in order to protect itself. This constraint on European principles of freedom and liberty implies that Europe is both undoing und redoing itself. The presence of the postcolonial migrants has become a test for Europe's commitment to Enlightenment ideals of humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism. Derrida reminds the Europeans that for hospitality to be unconditional, it needs to be extended without the imposition

of any stipulations on the guest. Furthermore, it entails a restructuring of the relationship between the host (who might be unprepared and ill-equipped) and the guest (who might be unexpected and uninvited). This also implies a reconsideration of the understanding of home by the host.

Inspired by Freud, the postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha (1994: 10) focuses on the uncanniness of postcolonial migration. For Freud, the uncanny *(unheimlich)* is the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden, but inadvertently comes to light. Bhabha relates this to the presence of postcolonial migrants in Europe, which prevents Europeans from forgetting and disavowing its colonial past in the form of a provocative reminder "We are here, because you were there". Migrants, for Bhabha, have an uncanny ability to be at home anywhere, which threatens those with a normative approach to home and belonging. As the experience with Brexit has shown, the uncanny presence of the migrant implies a disruption of the feeling of homeliness as well as fear of loss of sovereignty. Thus that which is homely *(heimlich)* can mutate into the profoundly unhomely *(unheimlich)* and can alienate and estrange us from what is familiar and sheltered. This disorientation through an encounter with an alien in one's home, namely, the presence of the postcolonial migrant in Europe, is perceived by some Europeans as uncanny *(unheimlich).*

However, this disorientation can also present an opportunity for Europe to humbly re-evaluate its assumptions about territory and belonging. In the face of this insecurity, Europe's responsibility to the other would entail putting its territorial authority and mastery over home and the world in question. This raises the challenge of how might the Europeans begin to assume such an aporetic responsibility, one that is paradoxical and double, and as Derrida puts it, "makes me the hostage of the other" (2005: 42)? How can Europeans be both guardian of European identity as well as open themselves to difference and alterity by suspending Europe's deepest convictions of superiority and exemplarity? Responsibility would consist in negotiating these two contradictory imperatives of both preserving and transforming what is European. In order to realize this, Europe must overstep and transgress itself in order to undergo the experiment and experience of the impossible (Derrida 2005: 84) by acknowledging the non-European other as a force that shows the limits of Europe. What is demanded from Europe is nothing less than the very de-universalization of European norms and values. Only by dismantling the vocabulary of Western political thought can a new concept of politics and a radically different ethics emerge. The geographical, economic and political entity with the boundaries that we know as Europe is a result of complex colonial production of space that is projected backwards in time. Instead of geography-as-destiny argument, which looks upon Europe as an identifiable region assigned superior position in a Eurocentric world history, the challenge would be to understand Europe in terms of its plurality, not as a fixed point of departure but impossible horizon of arrival. Therein lies the promise and challenge of a post-imperial Europe to come. Europeans would do well to heed Gandhi's suggestion: On being asked by a journalist, "What do you think of Western civilization?," Gandhi was reported to have responded, "I think it would be a good idea".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bhabha, Homi (1995): The Location of Culture, London: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques (1992): The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (2005): Rogues: Two Essays on Reason, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fanon, Frantz (1961): The Wretched of the Earth, London: Penguin.

Habermas, Jürgen (1990): Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit - Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Husserl, Edmund (1996 [1936]): Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie. Hamburg: Meiner.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1991): Zur Genealogie der Moral - Eine Streitschrift. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

NIKITA DHAWAN is Professor of Political Science (Political Theory and Gender Studies) and Director of the Research Platform Gender Studies: "Identities – Discourses – Transformations" at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Her latest publication is *Negotiating Normativity: Postcolonial Appropriations, Contestations and Transformations* (2016).