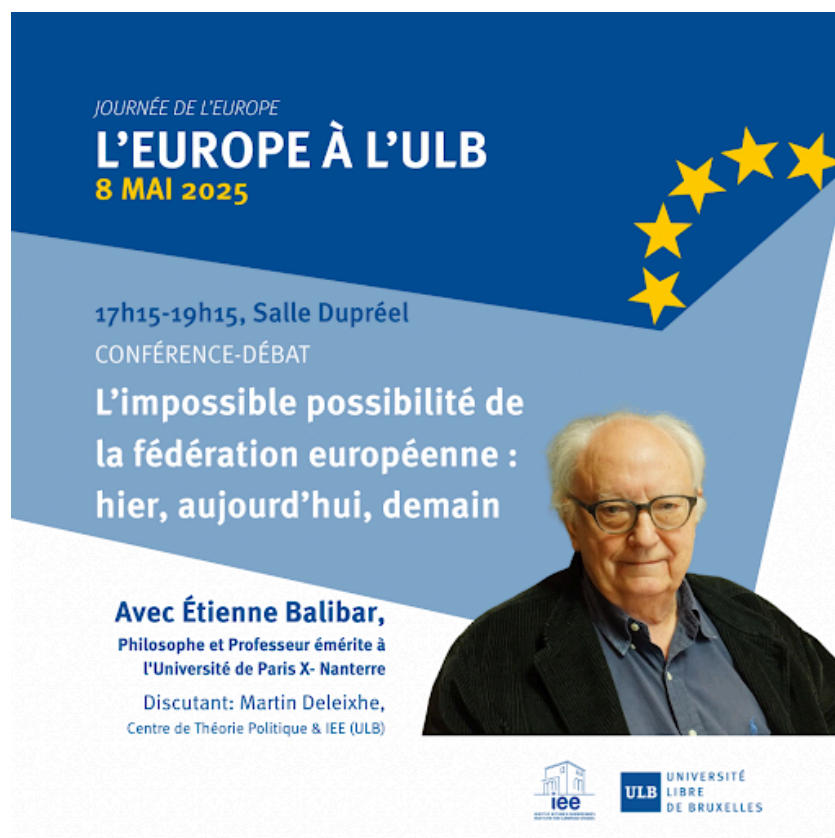


“The impossible possibility of European federation: yesterday, today, tomorrow” — Etienne Balibar

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, audience members,

The title I have chosen for my talk contains one of those logical paradoxes that are common in a certain philosophical tradition. It could simply be a cheap way of giving a speculative aura to banal considerations about the contradictions and conflicts that hinder the realization of a federal project accompanying the political institutions that—in varying “geometries” — has gradually equipped itself with the supranational Europe that emerged from the “resolution” of the conflicts that tore it apart during the

20th century: the two World Wars, then the “Cold War.” This project is, of course, defined in various, even antithetical ways, and it continues to provoke objections and resistance, sometimes from within its own official bodies. Nevertheless, it is undeniable, and for many of us, as for a large proportion of European citizens, it now enjoys a kind of self-evident status. If only as a *fait accompli*. Yet everything seems to suggest that its legitimacy, the certainty of its completion, and the very guarantee of its permanence can never be taken for granted. Returning, for the purposes of this conference, to some of the essential references in political science on European integration and its embodiment in the Union, I found several expressions of this paradox. For example, in the very title of the Preface written by Yves Mény for the 2016 issue of the *Revue Européenne* devoted to “European Federalism”: “The European Union and federalism: Impossible or inevitable?”[1] The content suggests that it is impossible in one sense and inevitable in another, but that since both senses are equally required by the history of the institutions, the contradiction is insurmountable, albeit shifting in its content and effects. It is in times of crisis or acute conflict that the paradox is brought to a head, and I could leave the reader to believe that my slightly different formulation, exhibiting the unity of opposites, is merely a rhetorical device to dramatize the issues at stake.

But I wanted to suggest something more. I remembered that several times in the past, perhaps out of a theatrical propensity to play Cassandra, I had identified moments of acute crisis with the possibility or imminence of an “end of Europe,” that is, a collapse or dissolution of the Union as a federal or quasi-federal construction. For example, when Greece's constitutional resistance to the Eurogroup's demands was crushed in 2015.[2] I was thus implicitly drawing, in a semi-strategic, semi-eschatological manner, analogies with the dissolution of other supranational constructions in modern Europe, albeit based on radically different principles, which had been believed to be irreversible. Regardless of the fragility of the diagnosis, what seemed characteristic of the situation at the time was a redoubling of external constraints due to the worsening of an internal conflict within Europe. But the current situation, which is no less critical, seems marked by a very different tension between contradictory signals coming from outside and inside the EU.

On the one hand, there is the war taking place on the EU's doorstep, in which it is in fact involved (I am referring to the war in Ukraine, although I believe that in some

respects the Palestinian genocide is even more serious and will have no less impact on Europe's future). The latest geopolitical developments resulting from the American about-turn, is widely interpreted as the paradoxical opening of a possibility for a qualitative leap forward in the integration of European nations: nothing less than the resurrection of the old project of the "European Defense Community, now supported by the same states that caused it to fail in the 1950s. This would be a decisive step in the transfer of state sovereignty from the national to the federal level, the consequences of which would be felt—if it takes place—in all areas of the economic and political life of the member states, not to mention the community consciousness of their citizens.

On the other hand, however, the rise of so-called “populist” movements, many of which are ‘in several European countries, their “hegemonic” capacity within the political class and the population, the support they enjoy from rival and ideologically convergent imperialist powers, suggest that analogies with the period in which Europe’s ability to civilize political conflict collapsed are not without significance. It is this particularly dramatic and unexpected new configuration of the tension inherent in the relationship that Europe has with its own institutional potential that I would like to discuss today, touching on at least some of the questions that need to be asked so that the inevitable or, on the contrary, indeterminate nature of current developments and their consequences are not simply the subject of intuition or speculation.

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The first set of problems I would like to raise concerns the relationship between the construction of a European community and the surrounding world, on which it depends for its very definition as a group of nations, and from which it is separated by history, borders, antagonisms, and inequalities of development and situation. I will naturally try to characterize as best I can the effect that the transformation of the “geopolitical” framework has on European construction, that is, on the modalities of “sovereignty” and its relationships with the nation state and supranationality. But I would also like to counter a certain tendency, favored by the current situation in academic discourse and public opinion, and insist that the “world” with which Europe is connected and on which it depends cannot be defined purely and simply in terms of alliances and conflicts between states or continental empires. Other dimensions

that are no less fundamental and irreducible must be taken into consideration. The challenge of this reflection seems to concern in particular the articulation of the concepts of power and independence, on which in turn depend conceptions of risk, security, and identity. The current proposal is that in an increasingly perilous “world,” even directly threatening to Europe, in which “fronts” are liable to flare up and shift unpredictably, the level of organization and institutions can only be federal. A Europe that seeks to continue on its own path cannot remain mired in competition between nations or remain hostage to the protections or constraints of a bygone era. I do not disagree with this. But the underlying concepts need clarification.

It is worth pausing, even briefly, to consider what independence and relations with the world mean for an entity such as Europe, whose identity is entirely conditioned by the traces and current effects of its old internal divisions, but also by the relations that its parts, together and separately, have maintained with the rest of the world. The one cannot be separated from the other. In both cases, these relationships have crystallized in the drawing and transgression of borders (or political and cultural super-borders) that are constantly shifting but survive their legal erasure. The palpable tension that exists today between the way in which the geopolitical context, and in particular relations with Russia, are perceived in Western and Eastern Europe is a clear legacy of the great “European civil war” formalized in the institutions of the Cold War (from which the European Union itself emerged). The EU overlaps in a way that is not random with the division of the two types of empire that emerged in Europe in the classical age (“continental” and “oceanic,” in Hannah Arendt's terminology), and even, albeit in a complex way, with the traces of the great political and religious schisms of the Middle Ages.

But on the other hand, nations—I would go so far as to say the typically European “nation form” before it was exported throughout the world—are themselves inseparable from their relationship to empires, which by definition have a global dimension, exceeding the geographical and civilizational limits of the “European continent,” however one tries to define them. This is in reality an impossible task, whether these nations were formed in the realization of an imperialist project or were the products of its decomposition. The feed-back effect from its long colonial history on the constitution of Europe and on the demographic or cultural composition of its nations is indelible, but is not strictly speaking exogenous. All this is to say, even

very schematically, that in the case of Europe (as in others around the world, but in a unique way, perhaps constitutive of its "idea"), internal borders are also external openings, and more generally, the distinction between inside and outside, between the "self" and the "world," does not obey the logic of alternatives. No internal evolution of Europe will ever be anything other than the flip side of one or more modes of relationship with its "outside," which is always already immanent to it. In more political terms, the idea of European independence or self-determination is one and the same with the question of whether Europe as such has the capacity not only to defend and protect itself, but also to influence the "cosmopolitical" processes that are already affecting its composition.

Let us return, then, to the war in Ukraine and the transformation of alliance systems that it is precipitating. I have said publicly—and the course of the fighting has not changed my mind, even as the suffering and destruction have mounted for the populations concerned—that Europe had no choice but to support the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion, which is both contrary to international law and fueled by a particularly brutal imperialist ideology.[3] This meant that Europe would enter the war itself, in a gradually evolving manner. This should not prevent us—quite the contrary—from fully realizing why the war in Ukraine is fundamentally a two-tiered, closely intertwined civil war. It is a European civil war, or rather a new avatar of the great civil war that tore Europe apart throughout the 20th century, because Russia is a European nation (and even a nation to which European civilization has made essential contributions) and because the current configuration of antagonisms in the East of the continent—including the question of where the line between democracies and dictatorships, between the inside and outside of the federal project, lies — is partly the result of the way in which the USSR, which was the realization of one of the great European political projects, found itself confined and misguided within the limits of a former Eurasian empire. It is a civil war on Ukrainian territory itself, not because all or part of the population of certain regions identifies with eternal Russia (as Vladimir Putin proclaims), but because multilingualism and therefore multiculturalism, resulting from a complex history of colonization and emancipation, have made the antagonistic legacies inextricable.[4]

But on the other hand, if we look at this "civil war," which has been going on for a long time—at least since the collapse of the Soviet system and the brutal

restructuring of the political, economic, and social regime that followed in its former space—in light of the strategic reversals brought about by the new US presidency, and if we summarize the episodes from the perspective of their place in global power relations, I think it is difficult to see how the conflict can be resolved without a radical change in the international order. economic and social restructuring that followed in its former space—and if we recapitulate the episodes from the point of view of their place in the global balance of power, I believe it is difficult to avoid two conclusions. The first is that the American Empire (which itself has, of course, deeply “European” origins and character, in the civilisational sense) has never been external to the strategic commitments of European countries or even to European integration as a political and economic entity, despite the latter being marked by a complex interplay of dependence and independence, and even defiance towards its “Big Brother.” “Western” Big Brother. The reversal of alliances that corresponds de facto to President Trump's decision to negotiate with Russia by accepting the terms in which it defines the conflict and guaranteeing it the current gains of its aggression may not be stable, but neither is it a personal whim, as some would have us believe. It is not to justify the Russian invasion to place NATO's previous support for Ukraine in the context of the project of “containment” and “rollback” (in the sense used by Zbigniew Brzezinski) which was deployed before and after the collapse of the USSR and sought to exploit the democratic aspirations of the non-Russian former Soviet republics. Nor is it applying a “campist” ideological framework to note that the terms in which the Trump administration is now imposing its relative protection on Ukraine contain a significant dose of undisguised colonialism. This means that, in reality, the United States is not disengaging from the European continent, but is seeking to maintain its influence there in a new geometry and in new forms, in a kind of new Yalta deal at the expense of the Ukrainians. The US interference in the political life of European states, to the benefit of neo-fascist forces, is obviously along the same lines.

All this means, as you will have understood, that I agree with others that the European Union, in its quest or need for independence, is today faced with two imperialisms, sometimes at war, sometimes in negotiation, in relation to which it must position itself. Its future depends on it. I do not place them on the same level in terms of the dangers they represent (but I can say this because I am speaking as a

European from Europe; I obviously could not say the same if I were Iraqi, or even more so Palestinian). There is a Russian expansionism of which Europe is a potential, but only partial, target. I do not believe that Putin, whether he is a new Napoleon or a new Hitler, has plans to invade the continent and stop only at Vienna, Berlin or Paris. But I do believe that the ideology of Greater Russia, of which Putin is the heir and which the regime's ideologues have combined with racialist and mystical rhetoric, implies ambitions for all the nations of the "near abroad" that were once part of the Tsarist empire. Europe therefore needs to be able to defend them and defend itself against this danger, which means arming itself better or arming itself differently. It also means developing a radical critique of the way in which Russia's influence and financial aid are feeding a whole section of the European far right. On the other hand, I do not believe that American imperialism represents a symmetrical danger (although the Greenland affair reveals the existence of expansionist ambitions that also target European territory, exploiting its incomplete decolonization). But I do believe that the question that has been latent since the end of the Second World War, namely what interest the community of European nations has in identifying with a "Western camp" whose definition was elaborated in America, must return to the forefront in order to finally receive, if possible, a response that is "Eurocentric," or rather that takes as its guiding principle the articulation of the interests of the European nations. The question of a "Western camp" whose definition was elaborated in America must come to the fore once again in order to finally receive, if possible, a response that is "Eurocentric," or rather that takes as its guiding principle the articulation of Europe's interests with those of the rest of the world, independently of any assignment to a "camp." I am therefore deliberately following the path taken by leaders such as Willy Brandt and Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War, asking myself how we can update their inspiration.[5]

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But as I was saying just now, it seems impossible to me to confine the question of Europe's place in the world (and the place that world developments assign to it) to these geopolitical considerations, however pressing they may be. I would add two other considerations, which are of a different nature.

We must distinguish between the geopolitical question in the sense just mentioned and a geoeconomic question concerning the transformations of globalization and the restructuring of contemporary capitalism. Need I point out that I am not an economist and that my assumptions on this point are fragile in my own eyes? I am thinking while trying to learn. Two ideas are currently circulating, which recent developments in the “trade war” launched by the United States tend to confirm. The first is that the era of triumphant neoliberalism, based on the intensification of the international division of labor, and therefore the spread of “value chains,” and the rise of cross-border capitalism, which confers a hegemonic function on the “logistical operations” of the circulation of goods (Mezzadra and Neilson), have come up against a nationalist and neo-mercantilist reaction.[6] The second is that the rising imperialism aspiring to global hegemony in place of the American Empire on both the economic and political fronts is China, which has become the world's largest industrial power and, in a whole range of fields (including “renewable energies”), its technological vanguard.

What would be the consequences of these changes for the European Union, which sees itself primarily as an economic construct based on free trade? I think two points can be made here. Firstly, the concept of imperialism, however useful it may be in correcting idealized visions of the global economy as a space of free competition free from power relations and inequalities of development, has the disadvantage of conflating geopolitical and geoeconomic issues that correspond to temporal developments and “geometries” (as Giovanni Arrighi put it) or “world divisions” (as Lenin put it) of a different nature.[7] They certainly interfere with each other, but they do not proceed from a single cause. This is why, from a European perspective, the question of the balance of power between the Russian and American empires and that of competition between American and Chinese capitalism raise completely different issues, which reasoning in terms of “camps” tends to blur.

Europeans do not find themselves “between” China and the United States in the same way that they find themselves “between” the United States and Russia, which is a decisive military and territorial power but today represents a negligible factor in the evolution of the world economy. Secondly, the competition between American and Chinese capitalism, each underpinned by powerful “economic statism,” albeit in two ideologically antithetical forms, is perhaps not primarily, and contrary to the

interpretative scenarios of Braudel-like-inspired economic historians, that of the old and new global hegemonies (as were once the Netherlands and England, or England and the United States, not to mention those aspiring to play the role of third wheel, such as Germany in the 19th century and Japan in the 20th). [8] It would be more a case of conflicting complementarity (if I may risk this oxymoron) between two aspects and two trends in the development of contemporary capitalism: on the one hand, industrial productivism, of which China, the new “workshop of the world” and spearhead of a new industrial revolution, has become the global center; on the other, the banking empire and, more generally, the domination of the market for the circulation of capital and financial services, over which the United States does not have a monopoly, of course, but from which it continues to benefit thanks to its retention of the dominant currency. Europe exercises neither of these two forms of domination, but is struggling to avoid simply becoming a consumer market and debtor of international loans.[9]

It is true that this dichotomous presentation may be relevant for understanding the terms in which customs and regulatory battles are currently being fought on a global scale. But its main drawback is that it neglects the meaning and effects of the IT revolution in communication tools and artificial intelligence, since this revolution, through what Thomas Berns and Antoinette Rouvroy have called “algorithmic governmentality,”[10], is not only bringing about a veritable “colonization of social relations,” from consumption patterns to the organization of daily life, but also disrupting the very structure of production, circulation, and financing operations by installing “platforms” that operate in a virtual space. It is part of what, elsewhere, I have attempted to call “absolute capitalism,”[11] incorporating into its regime of accumulation all or almost all human activities, and which relativizes the conflict between the two traditional sides of capitalism embodied by China and the United States, or rather becomes the real issue at stake in their rivalry.[12] I understand that the Draghi report presented last November sought to address how Europe, as an integrated economic community, can avoid decline and disintegration in the new globalisation, but we should also ask whether it can propose – and propose to itself – an original path in the technological transformation, i.e. develop an original form of capitalism, or perhaps (less obviously) an original form of compromise with capitalism.[13] But such a question – which has still not been the subject of any real

debate in European public opinion and society – only makes sense if we introduce the consideration of a third form of global environment, perhaps the most decisive of all in terms of civilization, namely the “planetary” or “terrestrial” environment.

Indeed, the word “environment” takes on a different meaning here. Although the current climate and biological catastrophe clearly has very significant geographical dimensions, because the earth is divided into heterogeneous zones that do not suffer equally from the effects of global warming or extractive policies that affect biodiversity and the living conditions of human communities, and do not contribute equally to what Indian writer Amitav Ghosh has called the “great derangement,” [14] there is a fundamental difference between a pattern of confrontation between more or less aggressive continental powers equipped with weapons of mass destruction, or even a pattern of distribution of economic resources and capital flows, and a topography of processes that contribute to the transformation of the Earth's habitat. Here we find, but in a much more material dimension, the question of the inadequacy of mechanical distinctions between the inside and outside of borders, which already haunted the consideration of the effects of the information revolution as a superimposition on the geography of nations of a virtual sphere that relativizes them. It is not necessary to cross political and economic borders for the consequences of overconsumption or overproduction of industrial goods (including those of the agricultural industry) to affect the living conditions and opportunities of people on the other side of the world. Any reproduction of a human and political community that follows a certain way of life or makes it the goal of its historical development is therefore always both the cause and effect of the consequences it has on the global environment of which it is a part and which permeates it, but also transcends it and implies its intersection with other communities, even other civilizations.

More precisely and more cosmopolitically, we can highlight the importance of three “contradictions”—in the sense that the dialectical tradition gave to this term—which mark the uncertainty of the place that European populations occupy in the environmental crisis and the role they could play in its resolution. First, there is the fact, already mentioned, that disasters caused by global warming or indirectly linked to environmental degradation (as we have seen with the Covid-19 pandemic), even if they can occur anywhere on the planet (think of the California fires or the floods in Spain), have a much more destructive and irreversible impact on underdeveloped

and highly impoverished continental areas, which contributes not to the emergence of solidarity policies but to the deepening of racial or racialized differences within the human race.[15] Then there is the fact (which Amitav Ghosh rightly emphasizes) that decolonization and economic growth in the countries of the “global South” seeking equality with their former colonizers is producing a negative accumulation in terms of environmental destruction: the countries of the North, including Europe, are still the largest consumers of carbon-based products or products incorporating components whose extraction devastates the environment, but the countries of the South are the largest producers, either to meet the needs of the North or to accelerate their own catch-up. Finally, there is the fact – with serious consequences for the political life of liberal democracies and deeply involved in the genesis of what are called “populisms”—that there is no economic program or planning principle applicable in the current state of social and political power relations, particularly in Europe, that would reconcile the preservation of a standard of living that is sustainable for the majority of the population with rational degrowth or deindustrialization, without which the effects of the planet's uninhabitability will become irreversible.

These “contradictions” are the backdrop against which the question of a European policy arises, one that is not only a way of enabling populations with their specific historical characteristics to coexist, but also a way of shaping a common future for them, the implementation of the federal project being a prerequisite for this. They do not negate the importance and urgency of geopolitical and geoeconomic issues, but they completely overshadow their significance, because they are both more urgent and more far-reaching, which makes it all the more surprising (or, on the contrary, all too understandable) that, despite periodic declarations of intent, they are constantly marginalized and euphemized. But confronting them and discussing them also requires — and we must be aware of this — a revolution or a conversion in the way we understand the ideas of power and independence. In light of ecological contradictions, maximum independence also means maximum interdependence, or a way of developing interdependence rather than neutralizing it. Above all, the traditional equivalence between the ideas of power and strength must be questioned, as philosophers inspired by Spinoza's work have been suggesting for years.[16] Understood dialectically as non-powerlessness, or emergence from powerlessness, i.e., the inability to influence the conditions, both internal and external, that determine

our ways of life and restrict our freedom, power cannot be identified with authority, i.e., with the ability to subjugate our enemies or adversaries by imposing on them a relationship of force that is as unilateral as possible, by bending their “will.” On the contrary, it must correspond to a maximum capacity to be affected by others, that is, to welcome their presence or influence, or to negotiate their demands in such a way as to make them compatible with our self-preservation.

Translated back into political terms, this means that Europe must neither forget nor deny the traces of imperial expansion (particularly colonial) that enabled it to structure itself into nations at the expense of the rest of the world, nor shut itself off in a fictitious isolation from which only financial transactions could escape, but transform the meaning and modalities of this dependence, making communication with the rest of the world (or with as many “worlds” as possible on the global horizon) the foundation of its own affirmation. And so, if I have expressed myself correctly, by making the environmental crisis the most urgent of all emergencies, setting a course for dealing with all the others, however pressing they may seem, whether they be war and peace, or competitiveness and growth.

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I thus arrive, very late and therefore very incompletely, to the question of federation, that is, to the uses and alternatives that this term covers for us today. I will take as my starting point a proposal recently formulated by the famous British historian Timothy Garton Ash (a staunch Europhile) which, like many of us no doubt, struck me and left me perplexed. Raising an unavoidable problem, it simultaneously proposes a solution that seems to merely reproduce the difficulty. Describing in July 2023 in *Le Grand Continent*[17] the rebirth of the Russian imperial project and its possible extension to entire regions of Eastern Europe, while admitting outright that this revival was partly a response to what he called “the expansion of the geopolitical West” after the collapse of the USSR, which included the simultaneous or staggered expansion of the European Union and NATO, Timothy Garton Ash explained that the European Union could only defend itself by acquiring an imperial dimension, i.e., armed or militarized, and centralized in terms of its decision-making capacity, although “without hegemony” between its constituent nations or nationalities (as was the case in traditional empires) or authoritarian restrictions on its internal democracy.

Hence the reference to the "liberal empire" historically embodied by the United States of America, and the use of oxymoronic phrases such as "post-imperial empire" or "anti-imperial empire." In short, in the world of empires (and imperialisms), only empires can survive, but Europe must embody the most harmless version of them.

This paradox did not seem tenable to me, but I then remembered a remarkable observation made by Raymond Aron more than 60 years ago, in the final section of his 1962 book, *Peace and War Among Nations*, where he writes that nations now face the choice of either joining a federation (potentially universal, or at least open to new members) or finding themselves incorporated into an empire with global ambitions (as envisioned by the Cold War camps).[18] This dilemma is striking because it presupposes (which not everyone will admit) that the era of absolute national sovereignties (or their appearance) is over, but that the modalities of their disappearance, or rather their transformation into a new historical form or "formation," are open to several possibilities. These possibilities are perhaps unequally necessary, but also unequally desirable from the point of view of a liberal or democratic political philosophy. It also suggests revisiting the question of federation not, as jurists tend to do, from the perspective of the sovereignty of states and its restriction or sharing, but from the perspective of the different modes of existence and configuration of nations according to whether they represent themselves as self-sufficient and unsurpassable absolutes, or, on the contrary, as components and stakeholders in more complex and heterogeneous entities, but nonetheless possessing a principle of unity or a common interest that must be translated into political and constitutional terms. Or, if one wishes, it suggests considering the question of the perpetuation or decline of nation states not exclusively from the point of view of state institutions, but from the point of view of what I referred to earlier as the "form of the nation." [19] It seems to me that it is precisely this attachment to this form, from the point of view of its imaginary as well as social functions, that lies at the heart of the antagonisms that can be observed today between European peoples and within them, the potentially devastating effects of which on the political unity and democratic constitution of Europe I mentioned at the beginning.

However, we cannot move forward in this direction unless we introduce into the very formulation of the problem an element that is just as political as that of sovereignty and its delegation to supranational governing bodies, but more directly linked to the social mechanisms of reproduction or disintegration of national cohesion. This is what I would like to do here by invoking, alongside and in addition to the “Aron theorem,” which situates the future of the nation-state, at least potentially, between a federal future and an imperial future (which also presupposes, contrary to Garton Ash's thesis, that the nation-state is not a historical end in itself, that federations can exist as poles of resistance and models of evolution in the world of empires). This is what I will call, by symmetry, the “Milward theorem.” I am referring here, as you may have guessed, to the work of British historian Alan Milward (often invoked in support of critiques of what a certain methodological nationalism calls “federalist utopia”), but using it in a somewhat reverse manner.[20] In his 1992 book, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, Milward, as we remember, defended the paradoxical thesis that—through a kind of political ruse—the gradual construction of the Community, and then the European Union, despite transferring increasingly important powers (especially economic powers, but in a modern society the economic cannot be separated from the political) to a supranational authority, had not weakened or relativized national independence, but on the contrary had prevented its decline and ultimately “saved the European nations from dissolution in the post-war conflicts.”

A provocative and debatable version of the argument holds that, from the outset, so-called European federalism had no other implicit objective than the construction of what General de Gaulle called “the Europe of nations,” which a number of European sovereignists are once again calling for today (in a clearly more sinister version). Federal institutions would therefore have been partly a fiction, partly a substitute for a capacity for self-defense that had become too weak or contradictory to real independence in today's world. But a more interesting version, in my view, is to link the political effects of European integration with the development of the welfare state and what I have elsewhere called the “national social state.”[21] For nations are certainly historical formations that are extraordinarily resistant to change, with deep linguistic, cultural, and imaginary roots, but they are not eternal, immune to the disintegrating effects of external shocks (such as wars of extermination) and the violence of internal conflicts (caused, depending on the case, by class conflict or by

what Spinoza called “theological hatreds,” or even a combination of the two). Like any social and historical “formation,” the nation needs to be reproduced, which also means periodically re-founded on new bases. My long-standing thesis (which is not original, except perhaps in terms of terminology) has been that the nation form in Europe has been reproduced and consolidated, and thus re-legitimized in the eyes of its own citizens, especially those at the bottom: the exploited workers, through the establishment of the national-social state (as a historical alternative to the totalitarian state, “national-socialist” as well as to pure economic “liberalism”), i.e. a state that constitutionalizes labor rights and “social security” within a national framework that is more or less restrictive (particularly with regard to the rights of foreigners), and conversely recasts the idea of solidarity or community among citizens by characterizing them, despite the great diversity of their occupations and conditions, as “active citizens” or “workers.”[22] But what Milward's theorem (or argument) adds to this hypothesis is that, historically, in the European context, the process of developing the national-social state was not purely autarkic, and did not take place in each national framework independently of the supranational environment, as if states were not part of a whole or an “economically unified ‘region.’”.. It was also European integration that promoted and guaranteed its permanence in each Member State in particular and in its own variant.

Such a formulation then makes it possible to understand when and how what constituted a guarantee for the nation form ceased to be so and even began to function in the opposite direction, as a factor of disintegration and crisis. The turning point, to put it very bluntly, was when the Delors Commission (supported by its national representatives) renounced the development, at the normative and economic policy levels, of a “European social state”, or, at the European level, what could be called a “federal-social state.” That is to say, it was when, in the context of the generalization of neoliberal policies that would be formalized by the “Washington Consensus”, the common currency was introduced to promote the integration and competitiveness of European capitalism without, symmetrically, transposing to the Community level the “social compromise” that institutionalized the gains of the class struggle and opened up the possibility of a reduction, even if delayed, of the wealth and power gaps between capital and labor. [23] The system of government is changing, but so is capitalism, and the two processes are inseparable. As a result,

the institutions of “Brussels” or “Frankfurt” are perceived and actually function as a means of outsourcing decisions that affect labor relations and social conditions, or as a means of removing them from popular contestation. And this is what is continuing today. The European Union is therefore encouraging states not to develop new forms of social security adapted to globalized capitalism, but to dismantle the old ones, despite resistance that is systematically denigrated as “corporate.” “Income inequality is reaching astronomical proportions, as in the rest of the world, while forms of precariousness that Robert Castel has described as ‘disaffiliation’ or “social insecurity” are developing.[24] From this situation, left-wing sovereignists such as Wolfgang Streeck conclude that labor rights can, in a sense, only be protected within a national framework, which erases the history of the power struggle that has shaped European integration and presents the result of a political choice as an essential characteristic. This opens the door to a choice between empire and nationalist populism, two forms of democratic degeneration. [25]

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This presentation is undoubtedly already much too long, without having succeeded in fully elucidating the questions I wanted to raise. If I have a little time left, I would like to open the discussion by formulating three consequences of the above, which will only be presented as open questions.

The first is that a federation cannot be built from above. More precisely, it cannot be built by simply transferring to a “federal” or “community” authority—even in a partial and gradual form—what the tradition of political philosophy, since Bodin and Hobbes, has called the “marks of sovereignty.” Or, more precisely, we cannot avoid the self-destruction of the federation if this transfer takes place without the formation, “from below,” a democratic collective power of equivalent generality. This is what has happened successively with the introduction of the common currency, the granting to the European Commission of the power to negotiate and conclude trade treaties, border control and the repression of migration flows in the Schengen and Dublin regulations, and what will happen tomorrow with defense capabilities if the international situation and the geopolitical argument that empires must be confronted with equivalent means push for the effective construction of a European army with national contingents. Naturally, there are material interests behind these initiatives,

not just ideological ones, such as replacing the failing export capacity of the automotive industry with an arms industry...

The result is what Habermas called, in a terrible phrase, *postdemokratischer Exekutivföderalismus*, and what my friend, the lawyer Carlos Herrera, has called “market statism.”[26] For my part, I have spoken of a “pseudo-federation,” which is not a step toward the realization of a federation, but a perversion of the idea and an obstacle to its acceptance by national citizens.[27]

The second consequence is that if we agree with leading political scientists (from Carl Joachim Friedrich to Robert Schütze)[28] and jurists such as Olivier Beaud that the “classical” distinction between federation and confederation is a matter of degree and convention, depending on whether one observes the relationship between national and supranational units in terms of the composition of unity or decomposition into multiplicity, the essential lies in the meaning of the process of transformation of national independence, in other words, in their movement toward federalization, which is more or less advanced depending on the needs of the historical situation, rather than in the constitutional form in which it crystallizes. If we combine this observation with the previous proposition, according to which “federalism from above,” which is not accompanied by any increase in the powers of the “bottom” (i.e., the citizens themselves) at the transnational level, works to the exact opposite of the stated goal, it appears that the processes of federalization and democratization are in fact inseparable. Democratization is not an accidental or complementary feature that can be added to an existing federation without it, since without democratization there is no federalization, or the federation self-destructs.

But what is transnational democratization? This question cannot be settled within the framework of the endless controversy over the respective powers of community bodies and nation states (or nations represented by their states), which gives rise to the stereotypical conflict between supranationalism (which is also referred to as the “post-imperial empire”) and nationalisms that invoke “popular sovereignty” as a lost paradise. Nor can it be settled by the formal institution of a “citizenship” that is supposed to transcend national identities. the post-imperial empire“) and nationalisms that invoke “popular sovereignty” as a lost paradise. Nor can it be resolved by the formal institution of a common, undifferentiated federal or European

citizenship, even if accompanied by a more or less deterritorialized right to vote. The debate on the existence or non-existence of a “European demos” is conclusive on this point, but in the negative.[29] However, it does not close the debate, but rather opens it up to reflection on the paths to democratization. Kalypso Nicolaidis had advanced this reflection in an interesting way by coining the neologism “demo-crazy,” that is, by attempting to inscribe the historical pluralism of European nations into their very conception of popular sovereignty.[30] But in doing so, she did not resolve the ambiguity that surrounds the two meanings of the idea of “people” and which is expressed periodically, sometimes in a liberating way, sometimes in a reactionary or regressive way (as in the transition from the slogan “Wir sind das Volk” to “Wir sind ein Volk” during the German revolution of 1989). It has rather perpetuated it. I obviously do not have a ready-made solution, but on the basis of what I outlined above about the social state and its contribution to the reproduction of the nation form, I would be tempted to say that the key to the movement “from below” for a democratic federation in Europe lies in the possibility of establishing an exchange, confrontation, conflict, or even dialectic between the two meanings of the word “people,” *das Volk* and *ein Volk* (and therefore also several *Völker*), that is, several histories, several cultures, several languages, not within the pre-established framework of state sovereignties, but in an open transnational space that is potentially common. In other words, to build a pan-European debate among citizens themselves (through their parties, movements, intellectuals, and artists) on the respective importance and intersection of their class, gender, race or ethnicity, and cultural interests, and on how to reconcile them.

Of course, this is easier said than done, or more accurately, it is a circular proposition: its implementation presupposes in a certain way that the result, i.e., the transgression of borders or their change of status, has already been achieved. It remains to be hoped that not only will necessity suggest expedients and initiatives, but above all that collective movements, by their very objectives, are already situated outside the circle. One of those movements which, for years, I would have assumed that, given its potentially global scope, would inevitably emerge across the national borders of Europe in a federal or quasi-federal form, was the youth environmental movement for the defense of the Earth; but this is still not the case, or only to a very limited extent...

Above all – and this is my final point – the conversation “from below” between social interests and forms of citizenship requires a channel of communication, tools, and a common language. The public sphere of liberal democracies was built, as we know, through literature, journalism, schools, political parties, but also through working-class countercultures within a national framework.[31] The decisive question posed to supporters of European federation as a democratic construct (Régis Debray once ironically put it to me) has always been: “In what language do these citizens of Europe communicate with each other?” Umberto Eco responded with a beautiful phrase that is often quoted (but whose origin cannot be found): “The language of Europe is translation.”[32] And it is true that translation is both a popular and a scholarly practice. But it is declining dramatically in Europe as elsewhere. During forty years of membership in the “European party,” following in the footsteps of the Manifesto di Ventotene written in 1941 by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, I long believed that the intensification of material and cultural exchanges, the movement of people, and even conflicts between citizens of different nations on the continent, with all its inequalities and difficulties, would give rise to a common “civic space” and encourage the inter-translation of languages. The opposite has happened, except for a tiny layer of cosmopolitan intellectuals and, let us not forget, a large but socially disqualified and segregated mass of immigrant workers, both from within and outside Europe. The cause is not only to be found in the rise of nationalism and the decline of internationalism, or rather, the latter is as much an effect as a cause. The fundamental cause is the replacement of conversation by the use of social networks and, above all, the widespread use of machine translation, which renders any “test of translation” (Antoine Berman), thereby eliminating both the need for and the agents of translation. What movements in Europe today, as elsewhere in the world, are likely to resist this colonization or find antidotes to it? I have no idea, but I am probably not in the right place to judge. Once again, I must content myself with pointing out the aporia, or the impossible possibility.

[1] Yves Mény: “The European Union and federalism: impossible or inevitable?”, *Politique européenne*, no. 53, 2016/3, *European federalism*.

[2] Etienne Balibar, *Europe, crisis and end?*, Editions Le Bord de l'eau, 2016.

[3] Etienne Balibar: "Pacifism is not an option," Mediapart, March 7, 2022.

[4] See the very interesting investigation by Daria Saburova: *Travailleuses de la résistance. Les classes populaires ukrainiennes face à la guerre* (Women Workers of the Resistance: The Ukrainian Working Classes Facing War), Editions du Croquant 2024.

[5] See Peter Brandt's essay: *Mit anderen Augen: Versuch über den Politiker und Privatmann Willy Brandt*, Dietz Verlag Berlin 2013. And Sophie Momzikoff, "Aux origines de la Maison commune européenne de Gorbatchev : influences et concepteurs (années 1970-1989)" (The origins of Gorbachev's European Common Home: influences and designers (1970-1989)), *Histoire Politique*, 46 | 2022.

[6] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson: *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, Duke University Press 2019.

[7] See E. Balibar: "Géométries de l'impérialisme au XXIème siècle" (Geometries of imperialism in the 21st century), AOC Media, November 25 and 26, 2024.

[8] Giovanni Arrighi, Adam Smith in Beijing: *The Promise of the Chinese Way*, Ed. Max Milo, 2009.

[9] See Michel Aglietta, *Zone euro. Éclatement ou fédération*, Paris, Michalon, 2012.

[10] A. Rouvroy and T. Berns: "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects for Emancipation. Disparity as a Condition for Individuation through Relationships?" in *Politique des algorithmes. Les métriques du web*, Réseaux 2013/1 no. 177 La Découverte

[11] E. Balibar: "Absolute Capitalism," in W. Callison and Z. Manfredi: *Mutant Neoliberalism. Market Rule and Political Rupture*, Fordham University Press, 2020.

[12] See, for example, Pierre Veltz: *La société hyper-industrielle. Le nouveau capitalisme productif*, Editions du Seuil 2017.

[13] The future of European competitiveness: Report by Mario Draghi, European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en

[14] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Other Stories for the Age of Climate Crisis*, Wildproject 2021.

[15] The director of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, spoke about this as "vaccine apartheid." See my commentary: "One world, one health, one species. Pandemic and Cosmopolitics," in E. Balibar, *Cosmopolitics: From Borders to the Human Species*, Editions La découverte, 2022.

[16] See the work of Antonio Negri, in particular: *The Constituent Power: Essay on the Alternatives of Modernity*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

[17] Timothy Garton Ash: "The Union as a post-imperial empire," *Le Grand Continent*, July 20, 2023.

[18] Raymond Aron: *Peace and War Between Nations* (1962), Eighth edition with a new introduction by the author, Calmann-Lévy, 1984. Olivier Beaud refers to this in his *Théorie de la fédération*, Presses universitaires de France, Léviathan collection, 2007 (p. 68 ff.).

[19] I outlined a theory of this "form" in my contributions to the book written with Immanuel Wallerstein: *Race, nation, class. Les identités ambiguës*, new expanded edition, Editions La Découverte, 2018.

[20] Alan S. Milward: *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, Routledge 1992. A significant use of Milward's argument in an anti-federalist sense can be found in Perry Anderson's book, *The New Old World*, Verso 2009.

[21] Etienne Balibar: *Les Frontières de la démocratie*, La Découverte 1992; *La Proposition de l'égaliberté*, Presses Universitaires de France 2010. An in-depth discussion of the conflictual relationship between the national-social state and the process of neoliberal globalization, drawing extensively on my formulations and expanding on them considerably, can be found in Edouard Delruelle's book: *Philosophie de l'Etat social. Civilité et dissensus au XXIe siècle*, Editions Kimé 2020.

[22] This applies equally to the West and East of the bloc division, although in very different ways that need to be discussed in detail. The dismantling of the social security structures inherited from "real socialism" at the very moment when those of the social-democratic "European model" were being called into question in the West is one of the fundamental causes of the rise of "populism," particularly in Germany.

[23] In correspondence following my presentation, Justine Lacroix objected: "You have criticized the Delors Commission for giving priority to the single market over the construction of a social Europe and then to the single currency over economic policy. But Delors did not have a majority in the Council to build a social Europe and implement an economic policy. Before launching the internal market, he toured the capitals to propose a social Europe and came up against a brick wall (...) Delors was certainly no revolutionary, but he cannot be confused with Lamy. I acknowledge this correction, which amounts to not confusing the result with the intentions. But the question remains as to why Delors allowed himself to become trapped in this power struggle... Useful analyses of this issue can be found in Robert Salais' book, *Le viol d'Europe. Enquête sur la disparition d'une idée* (The Rape of Europe: Investigation into the Disappearance of an Idea), Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.

[24] Robert Castel, *L'insécurité sociale. Qu'est-ce qu'être protégé ?*, Seuil et La République des Idées, Paris, 2003

[25] Wolfgang Streeck: *Entre globalisme et démocratie. L'économie politique à l'heure du néolibéralisme finissant*, Gallimard 2023.

[26] J. Habermas: *La constitution de l'Europe*, French translation, Gallimard 2012; Carlos M. Herrera: "Forme politique et espace démocratique : d'un étatisme sans Etat et de son incertain dépassement,"

in Une Europe politique ? Obstacles et possibles, edited by Ninon Grangé and Carlos M. Herrera, Editions Kimé Paris 2021.

[27] E. Balibar: *Europe, crise et fin ?*, op. cit. I discuss Habermas' positions at length in this work.

[28] Robert Schütze: "Two-and-a-half Ways of Thinking about the European Union," in *Politique européenne*, no. 53/2016, cit.

[29] Catherine Colliot-Thélène: *La Démocratie sans "Demos" (Democracy without "Demos")*, Paris, PUF, 2011. Colliot-Thélène believes that the inconsistency of 'demos' as the political foundation of the federation is offset by the decisive role it has played in the constitutionalization of the "subjective rights" of its citizens, which constitutes a point of entry into the question of the reciprocal guarantee of the "rule of law," which I have not been able to develop in this presentation due to space constraints.

[30] "Demos et Demoï : fonder la constitution," by Kalypso Nicolaïdis and Aïcha Messina, in *L'Europe en partage*, Lignes 2004/1 no. 13, Éditions Léo Scheer.

[31] Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1972 (a partial French translation exists under the name of Oskar Negt alone).

[32] According to Barbara Cassin, it dates from Eco's lecture at the Assises de la traduction littéraire d'Arles (Arles Literary Translation Conference) in autumn 1993 or from Eco's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France a year earlier. Barbara Cassin, "La langue de l'Europe?" [The language of Europe?], *Po_sie*, vol. 160-161, no. 2-3, 2017, pp. 154-159.

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