

The end of ‘The End of Europe’

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There are two ways of looking at the succession of European crises. One is the negligence mode that is so typical of EU insiders. I call it ‘the circular mode’ and it goes roughly like this: we have seen many crises and the EU has always found a way to circumvent them, so it will not be different this time. Then there is the ‘breaking-point mode’. Political unions, states, empires and other polities have been known to collapse. So this may happen to the EU as well. In this mode of interpretation, signs are scrutinised in search of the impending doom of the European project: Grexit, Brexit, Schengen, whatever is the order of the day.

It is fun noticing that these two modes have their counterparts in the language of religion, as interpreted by theologians, philosophers and anthropologists: the circular mode is the ‘myth of the eternal return’ and we could describe the search for a breaking-point scenario as an example of the apocalyptic or messianic worldview. This is only seemingly a farfetched source for comparison: there is an eschatological tendency, inherent to our thinking about the passing of time, which tends to permeate our political and economic attitudes, as it did in our past with the religious phenomenon. We look for patterns and repetitions, we think we detect narrative arcs and we console ourselves with conclusive tales.

So, the first thing one has to do when thinking about the current state of the European project is to get rid of this paraphernalia, which sometimes only thinly disguises our own ideological prejudices or political preferences. You happen to dislike the euro and its implications; the damn currency does not make any sense to you; so you will predict its demise at any given juncture of its trajectory (remember how supposedly Cyprus had already left the eurozone?). Conversely, you enjoy comfort at the existence of the EU; you may even have taken a closer role in its inner workings than most people; you will then predict that the current crisis will be overcome, and you will point out to a past ‘Irish turnip crisis’ (I invented that one) that only you know existed in order to show that we’ve been here before.

So, yes, everybody is right. The EU may indeed collapse, or become irrelevant. And it may muddle on until the next crisis. Nothing excludes either possibility. But, then again, this tells us absolutely nothing.

At this point, I may bring in my own prejudices. My ‘forma mentalis’, as it were, or my attitudinal predisposition, is one of tragic optimism. I tend to emphasise the ongoing possibilities of us experiencing the same kind of great revulsions that we read about in books. We have become complacent about these kinds of events, which increases the possibility of them happening. At the same time, I tend to believe (or maybe just cling to) the possibility of collective moral progress of humankind. In short, I don’t like the ‘end of history’ trope, but I also tend to avoid the ‘repetition of history’ one. I leave this here for what it is so that you can take what I’m about to say with a grain of salt.

If one tries to look dispassionately at the state of the European Union at the threshold of 2016, what would justify the belief that it is about to end? In my view, none of the current crises that leave the journalists and commentators so breathless.

Take the eurozone crisis. To be sure, the euro is a badly conceived project that still lacks important elements to be sustainable, not to say beneficial to all involved. Nobody can honestly dispute that. What is unsustainable cannot be sustained and what is not beneficial to all parts involved will see

someone leaving at some point. All these are normal anti-euro reservations. I believe in them and, I may add, I do not have any special affection for the single currency since I did see it very close to collapse in the end of 2011.

Where I do differ from our anti-euro friends is that I do not see the currency as static. Back in 2011 and 2012, the euro was undergoing an acute crisis. After Mario Draghi stated that the ECB would do 'whatever it takes' to save the euro, this has morphed into a chronic disease, which has only been partially addressed (but not cured) by unconventional monetary policy, namely quantitative easing. To be sure, the euro still has many structural problems. But if one fails to see the difference between these conditions — acute crisis, chronic 'disease', structural problems — one will make predictions that will fail to adhere to reality, as it has happened again and again to all who have predicted either Grexit or euro collapse in recent years. After 2012, the euro's problems are more easily solved by internal coordination than by fragmentation.

Something that the euro's critics, mainly economists and macroeconomics enthusiasts, fail to see is the reality of the euro and the EU as a juridical construct. When they do recognise this, they will somehow deny its importance. Treaties, so the story goes, mean nothing in the face of economic logic.

This is not true, however. European treaties and European law are at the basis of the euro and all other EU endeavours and they are an integral part to its functioning and logic, either economic or otherwise. He or she is a bad economist who fails to recognise the economic importance of institutions. Economists will usually point out that the treaties do not foresee euro exit, but they will fail to follow the implications, namely that it is virtually impossible to leave the euro without leaving the EU. And this means losing access to the single market, which in most cases completely defeats the logic of the 'devalue to export' strategy that plays such a big part in the supposed benefits of euro exit.

So, for the time being — and in the medium to long haul — solving the euro's problems is still much simpler than heading for a euro breakup. And staying within the euro is still a less complicated task than facing all the obstacles (economic and otherwise) of leaving.

And that is without mentioning closing borders, leaving Schengen, etc. Well, à propos Schengen — won't terrorism bring down Schengen and won't this in turn sound the death knell for the European project? Well, it might, but there's a much greater probability that it won't.

There's a certain resilience to the Schengen area that resides in the fact that it is so useful to millions of people and that it is based on ongoing institutional habits of the EU that create impetus and momentum. Home Affairs ministers will complain about the imperfections of Schengen. But they will still meet in Brussels every few weeks and realise that their problems are much more easily solved by strengthening Schengen and staying inside than by going it alone. This, in turn, will create legal and political problems for the European Commission and European Parliament to address — and fundamental rights problems as well. In the short term, terrorism is a challenge to Schengen. In the medium term, it will probably lead to Europol becoming more like a European FBI, which I'm saying will be a bad thing without democratic oversight, which means that we will have to create conditions for this democratic oversight.

What about the refugee crisis? Will it bring down the EU? Come on, give me a break. We know perfectly well how to resettle and integrate refugees and have done so many times in the past. This is a matter of political will.

What about Brexit? Sorry to say this to my British friends, but Brexit is mainly a British problem, not a European one. I would like to see the UK remain in the EU, and I even see an interest on the part of

my country Portugal in that happening. At the end of the day, however, if the UK leaves this will be something to lament, but it won't be the end of the EU.

But can anything, then, finish off the EU? Well, of course. A collapse of the rule of law — something that we already see happening in Hungary — or the rise of fascism — which we may witness in France — are the greatest threats to the EU. We easily forget that the European project is mainly an antifascist response to the interwar period. Fascism is, and will remain, the main enemy of the EU. Progressives who are now tending towards Euroscepticism should think more about the implications of that.

Hence the big dilemma and, at the same time, the biggest mission of the tragic optimist: setting aside false fatalism in order to better see what really are the biggest impediments to the blossoming of an emancipated humankind. If only we would engage less in spurious talk about 'the End of Europe' we would surely be better equipped to really fight the monsters that can (again) bring down the European project and promise.