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The malaise of Democracy

Víctor Pérez Díaz

Translated by Julie Scales

CHAPTER 2

THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACIES

1. THE EXISTENTIAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL CRISES

Liberal democracy is a limited and fragile commodity. We must know its limits, be aware of its conditions and cultivate it in order for it to last, and perhaps even flourish. Its limits are those inherent to all human experience, which as such has a limited spatial and temporal reach. Furthermore, political experience must be combined with the other economic and social experiences it influences and by which it is influenced. Democratic experience, in particular, has its own inherent difficulties, including those related to the rules of the game and the social imagery that impregnates it and on which it is based. Its conditions are, thus, institutional and cultural: they refer both to the design of its rules and moral character and to the people's sense of direction. In terms of its fragility, we must remember that, in the history of the human species, liberal democracy is a rare flower. Although it now seems confident and consolidated, a model for all that has no alternative, it only seems this way to its supporters because there have been and continue to be alternatives. Today there are many authoritarian states, or hybrid authoritarian/democratic states, and some that are totalitarian (not to mention the failed, delinquent or rogue states). Nor have liberal democracies always existed; in reality they are, in the strictest sense, fairly recent.

Democracy existed in some Greek cities more than two millennia ago, and the experience lasted, in Athens for example, for two centuries. Republican, mixed

and forms of government with an element of democracy have been more frequent, and have existed using a variety of formulas, more or less constantly, over the course of the last two millennia in Europe and other parts of the world.¹ But as we understand them today, as liberal democracies with limited, representative governments, they arrived in Western Europe to a lesser extent and late, less than two centuries ago, only to disappear in the 1920s and 1930s and return after two world wars and a number of civil wars. Things have been even more complicated in Eastern Europe and Russia. In reality, so complicated that a series of robust totalitarian governments sprang forth in the heart of European societies in the 20th century, and one of these, communism, has lasted nearly to the present day. In Latin America, democracy has come and gone many times. We could say, in general terms, that democracies come, go, return, and can disappear again. Seen in this light, taking the democratic experience as definitive, lasting forever or for a long time, seems unreasonable. If democracies are (“consolidated”) buildings, a big enough earthquake can reduce them to ruins.

If, moving away from the commonplaces of the time, we adopt an evolutionist perspective and wish to look at democracy as a political institution that is “better suited to the environment” than others, we can undoubtedly do so; but we run the risk of finding ourselves in the company of Dr. Pangloss, that character from Voltaire’s *Candide* who insisted that the world he lived in was the best of all possible worlds. He maintained this belief even while being hung, beaten and tied to a bench in the galley, or when witnessing an earthquake or sinking ship. His optimism was admirable but his realism, scarce; at least with regard to his experience in the moment.² And as humans, each and every generation must do what we have to do in the brief reference of a moment. It is better to wait until the end of time for an infinite mind to illuminate us (or illuminate itself), retrospectively, as to what has happened and explain to us (and to itself) the evolutionary law of human things from beginning to end.

In order for democracy to last, it is fundamental for humans, here and now, to believe that it should last and decide to make it last, applying our resources, and specifically our energy and prudence, to make this possible. More than the tepid conviction that democracy is inevitable and will adjust to what is thrown at it; and, of course, more than the (no less tepid) conviction that it is the “least bad” option among all the possible political regimes: which is like choosing the least serious of all deadly diseases, we will need to believe it is a good thing, and that we choose it because, when given a choice between sickness and health, we prefer health.

In other words, if democracy is a limited, coveted, fragile commodity, we must add to the discussion an explicitly regulatory perspective, a historical and comparative consideration that tells us which circumstances favor this commodity, and a robust sense of its eventuality or indeterminate nature.

¹ As Rosanwallon pointed out (2008: 108), the general feeling in the 18th century regarding previous experience, well expressed by Montesquieu and other authors, was that democracy was unstable and had an intrinsic tendency to corrupt its own principles.

² Voltaire (2003 [1759], chapters 4-6 and 28).

1.1 THE EXISTENTIAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL PROBLEM

Just as any political state or regime, democracy is justified, above all, because it meets the existential goal of keeping the social body alive. The minimum content, fundamental to the common good, that a democratic state must serve is that the social body not fall into a state of decadence (or illness) that leads it to death: that it continue to exist as such, maintaining its identity, that it defend itself from external threats and not destroy itself from within. This is what we can call the existential function (and, in this case, problem) of a political system. This is why the state needs an appropriate balance of power: to achieve this goal. And this is just what gives the state in question substantial legitimacy (much different from the mere formal legitimacy to which Weber refers).³

The first sign of a healthy social body is that it is alive, and, next, that it is well ordered to function. Of course this last condition requires putting internal relations among the various parts of society in order, to start with, in terms of deliberation and decision-making regarding common issues. This is what could be called the function (and, in this case, problem) of political representation. In the case of democracy, this implies a relationship between those that govern and the elite (the few), and ordinary citizens (the many) that is structured in such a way that the many have a significant weight at least at certain times and regarding fundamental issues, including, specifically, choosing their leaders.

However the social body in question isn't, in this case, equivalent to that which Menenius Agrippa, in the account of Titus Livius, understood to be a living organism whose members disagree, and in which the "stomach" of the patricians must appeal to "the hands and teeth," the *plebe*, to understand the unity of the group and the division of work between those who reason and decide, and those who execute.⁴ It is now the body of a highly differentiated society, understood as an order of freedom, whose different parts have a substantial degree of autonomy and demand their share in the deliberation and decision-making process. And it is no longer set in a traditional agrarian economy against the simple history of the founding of a city, but in a complex economy under the weight of a long, confusing history that is barely coherent. In such a case, indicators of whether or not political institutions (and not only they) carry out their existential and representational functions become much more elusive. In a strict history of modern society and democracy it would be necessary to specify their evolution, their high and low points. For the purpose of this essay, I believe it is enough to recognize that, roughly speaking, the indicators show, as seems obvious, that over the course of time democracy has shown itself to be compatible with extraordinary economic growth, a welfare system with public and private components that has facilitated notable social cohesion, and that, in many moments, the apparatuses of the state in question have worked with a degree of efficiency and efficacy that the people have found quite satisfactory.

³ Weber (1978 [1914/1920], I, 3, ff, 213, ff.)

⁴ Titus Livius book III (1997 [59 B.C./A.D. 17]). Which Menenius Agrippa only partially achieves, because the patricians have to accept, in turn, the tribunals of the people, to a certain extent above the law, that represent and protect the commoners against the consuls.

However our aim here isn't to reiterate this verification of the present moment, but to explore some fundamental problems, related both to the existential and representational functions of contemporary societies.

In fact, we have two parts of the issue to explore: whether today's democracies, despite the self-confidence that can be deduced from the sum of noteworthy past and present successes, are carrying out their functions of existential affirmation and political representation, which presupposes a living, healthy social body; or whether, on the contrary, something, of a certain importance, is occurring so that these functions are not met or met only with difficulty. Or, rather, whether we are facing a crisis, even an existential crisis.

1.2 A MORE PROFOUND DISMAY: POSSIBLY A TRANSCENDENTAL CRISIS?

Politics is concerned with the problems of existential affirmation and political representation, but also something more. At least over the millennia for which we have good records, it has been normal for politics to also try to respond to a transcendental issue. Through this, a community affirmed its position in the order of the universe, which generally included, as Heidegger said, "men and the gods, the heavens and the earth."⁵ Kings or magistrates, in conjunction with priests, acted in representation of the community in a cosmic, transcendental drama, and this is what gave the community a sense of permanence over time, beyond that which was contained in the experience of each of its members' brief human lives. The modern world hasn't known what to do with the legacy of this problem, and there can be no doubt that modern pretensions of imagining a world made up of "eternal nations" is a lighthearted version of this dramatic vision of the past. This suggests an impoverished collective imagination, but also a return to the polytheistic, animist past of those who saw their ancestors and (now, maybe, more than ever) the future generations, the invisible past and future, as a link through time, or an anchor to something that transcends present time (the *seculum*).

I won't delve into this issue now, as it requires a more extensive argumentative space than I can devote to it here. For two reasons. Firstly, it goes beyond the limits of the problem of democracy *per se*, and points to that of modern society as a whole. Secondly, because in order to develop this argument, it is necessary to establish common premises on which to construct it, and these tend to be absent in debates in the modern world. The situation is, thus, similar to that Pascal may have experienced when trying to convince a "libertine" of his time⁶ of the veracity of Christianity, and saw himself obliged to skirt around natural reason with the help of what he called reasons of the heart that reason doesn't know. Well, here we have a similar problem. It is difficult to argument today in terms of the transcendental issue. The modern world has lost the religious dimension that existed in the medieval and classical worlds; and a sort of pyrrhonism or transcendental skepticism has taken root, according to which the issue of politics is that of interests and passions "of the here and now": the

⁵ Heidegger (2001: 146 ff, 171 ff).

⁶ Or, rather, trying to persuade a man lost in a life of *divertissement* by appealing to his spirit of *finesse* and reasons of the heart (Pascal, 1958 [1658/1662], fragments 139, 277 and 282).

interests of prosperity and safety, and the passions of freedom and equality, for example. And this seems to be enough to decide which the best political regime is.

Nevertheless, the fact is that when, from that perspective, western countries, and Europeans in particular, look at the world of so-called globalization, they can't avoid feeling a profound sense of dismay.

This sensation has two sides. On one hand, we believe ourselves to be the mirror of the world, the light on the hill that illuminates it, and we imagine a world attracted to our example. On the other, we can't quite see, in fact, a world observing us with such rapture nor one that is being created in our image. And it even happens that, when looking in our own mirror, we begin to doubt (and in no little way) in ourselves, which means that we don't really esteem or admire ourselves that much, and maybe don't even love ourselves all that much.

The modern democratic world (and even more the totalitarian world) tends to see itself through the prism of secularity, meaning that we abide by the *seculum* of the here and now. We find ourselves at a fork in the road where both options lead to a dead end. On one hand, dealing with society and its collective will as the ultimate reason of all things, only that this information isn't enough to determine the contents of that will, which turns out to be arbitrary. On the other, when considering society as a group that is susceptible to breaking down into a myriad of individual agents, whose will would be the ultimate reason of all things, we again have the same indecisive contents. In both cases, we are led to a point where we tell ourselves everyday: "*Carpe diem*, make the most of the present." However this mistaken phrase suggests a new question, which has no answer. Because the present is fleeting, so much so that it seems to be constantly slipping through our fingers; and because making the most of it means we must do something (make the most of what?), and we aren't sure what we want, nor if we can achieve it.

And if, because we live in a collective image that is a hybrid of modernity and pre-modernity, we see the world through the prism of some of the universal religions (or other local ones), in this case, our uniqueness *qua* modern western culture is drastically reduced. We would be a mere variant of old lifestyles, which left behind a legacy of lifestyles whose content is quite similar to those from the pre-modern past (let's say, of moral integrity and service ethic, and of understanding things) but without the ecclesiastical and religious connotations of that time. Modernity would be, in that case, a mutation of other forms of civilization that have existed in humanity for millennia and millennia, and the intrinsic value of this variant would be considerable, undoubtedly, but not extraordinary.

Of course we can always reduce modernity to an experience in and of itself, separate from "men and the gods, the heavens and the earth": without a prior foundation. In this case, it would be a mere affirmation of indeterminate freedom, or of power *per se*: the attempt to roll out a "will of power" and "to control destiny." But in this way we return to another variant of our ancestral religious experience, as described in the Tower of Babel story in the Bible: an

experience of excess or hubris that ends in a breakdown of communication and the human community.⁷

In any case, the expression “controlling destiny” has given the modern western political experience a delirious touch of grandiloquence and irrationality; perhaps if we had stayed sober (and had not wandered around like sleepwalkers, against the recommendations of Heraclitus), it would have been enough to grant the state the ability to solve some specific problems. But that same grandiloquent expression has also given it a touch of levity, like that evoked through the word “*Tekef*” interpreted by the prophet Daniel the night before the fall of Babylon: “Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting”.⁸

Whichever version of human ability we adopt, grandiose or prudent, that fact is that, here and now, the modern state and the system of governance in the world constructed (or trying to be constructed) around it don't seem capable of controlling the world, nor of solving some of its important problems, in many cases. The fact that the state is democratic and holds the “sovereign will of the people as a whole” (as we tend to say) doesn't substantially alter the situation. The fact that people are free doesn't imply that they are omnipotent, nor even that their power is great. To start off, this freedom corresponds to a directionless indecisiveness. In exercising their free will, this will comes up against external limits and, moreover, (paradoxically) the internal limit of its own limitlessness, of its directionless indecisiveness: not knowing what to do with this freedom. As Chuang Tzu would say: it is fine for man to get what he wants as long as he knows what he wants.⁹

2. CURRENT DIAGNOSES: (A) A GENERAL OVERVIEW

2.1 FLEETING MOMENTS, DEBATES UNDERWAY, LOCAL SITUATIONS

With this we have only the first, and very slight, suspicion of what a democracy in crisis can mean: an existential crisis, a representational crisis and, perhaps, a transcendental crisis, although I will only touch on this last topic here with a superficial reference at the end of the book. But even limiting my analysis to the first two topics, we must discuss two interrelated issues before moving too far ahead: how we will deal with the issue and its background. In this case, my approach to the issue consists in focusing on the problems, above all, as they are perceived and handled in the situation in which they are debated and decided. Agents deliberate, decide and act in the present time, although it is a present burdened with the legacy of the past and open to the future, indeterminate. They do so within a local situation. They do so with the knowledge at hand in the moment, not that from some months or years in the future. And they do so with diagnoses in hand, those that circulate in their immediate public space, prominent among which are those of local observers, journalists, politicians;

⁷ In this regard, I recommend the two texts Oakeshott devoted to the topic (1991: 465 ff; 1999: 179 ff).

⁸ Book of Daniel 5: 27.

⁹ Merton (2004: 3).

and which are reflected in the corresponding speeches and publications that have, almost by definition, the somewhat provisional nature of a passing impression and a gamble. The democratic experience is modulated in this way according to a pace that responds to a precise historicity, and in a very different way depending on the region, or even the country, and the time in question.

With all of this, I will add to the following diagnoses an important caveat. When we refer to the “current day,” we refer to a vital process that is constantly in flux. At times, change, or the absence thereof, seems to respond to consistent trends, to firm institutional constraints, to consolidated mentalities. We can always find some demographic regularity, some stable attitudes, some large-scale strategies driven by forceful agents and supported by powerful media. But seen as a whole and up-close, the historical process seems to be made up, rather, of a series of fleeting moments, the situation of each one open to a variety of possibilities. Thus, the path that lies ahead of each of these moments must be treated, in all effects, as substantially undefined by the starting conditions.

Analyzing some countries in the fleeting present moment, as I will do now, implies accepting the limits inherent in this undefined process currently underway. With these analyses, I only aim to illustrate a general argument, sketch out some *ex post facto* explanations and propose possible scenarios, knowing that the data and my interpretations will have to be corrected and re-interpreted further down the line. In doing this, time may convince us that what has happened was neither as promising nor as worrying as we imagined, or that, on the contrary, it was much more serious because we didn't see it when it was right in front of us, perhaps because we didn't want to.

In any case, it is advisable to see the situation and prospects for the future of democracies around the world from a certain distance, now and in general. Ancient cultures lacked a philosophy of history, some thought in terms of cycles of degeneration and, eventually, regeneration, but they had the sensation that any order that could be achieved at any given moment would have a somewhat accidental nature. Christian theology, undoubtedly, introduced the exceedingly robust imprint of a “sense of history,”¹⁰ that, in one way or another, has underlain the development of a later philosophy of history that is profoundly optimistic. Many modern authors get carried away by a similar optimism when they believe we are reaching the end of our long march towards modernity,¹¹ which the triumph of democracy would be a part of, because, to top it off, and despite its numerous defects, this system would have shown itself to be the fairest and most effective form of government.¹² From this point of view, there would be no reason to not just sit and wait for new waves of democracies to appear,¹³ until every continent ends up submerged in the democratic ocean,

¹⁰ Not so much in the theology of Saint Augustine as in that of Saint Buenaventura. Ratzinger (2007: 199 ff).

¹¹ Taylor (2004: 17)

¹² Dunn (2006)

¹³ Which would follow the second wave that appeared after World War II, the third wave of Euro-Mediterranean countries and others in Asia and Latin America, and the fourth after the implosion of the Soviet Union. See Guénard (2008, 212 ff) on changes in tone, more optimistic to more skeptical, in the literature on the transition and consolidation of these democracies between 1980, the end of the century, and the beginning of the 21st century.

metaphorically speaking. Other, more skeptical, authors, disassociate themselves from the tradition of a philosophy (and a theology) of history, and point not only to multiple forms of modernity (some of which could be other than democratic, like communism and fascism) but also to a plurality of historical experiments underway, of which modernity itself would only be one of the various alternatives.¹⁴

In the rest of this section I will provide rough sketches of the situation in some countries around the world. I will not attempt to delve deeply into specific problems, but to illustrate some traits of a more general problem, that of some democracies that try to solve their existential and representational problems in the context of globalization. This context evokes the memory of the ancient *polis* on the verge of being incorporated into a *cosmopolis* (which I will refer to in the next chapter).

2.2 RUSSIA AND CHINA, HYBRID STATES WITH UNCERTAIN FUTURES

Russia and China aren't democracies today according to the western model, but it can be useful to mention their experiences. It is obvious that in the current world there is a large variety of historical possibilities, and it would be enough to focus our attention on what is happening in China or in Russia (not to mention the Arab nations, for example) to see how doubtful it is that liberal democracies will triumph in the short, middle and, to the extent it is within our reach, long term. This isn't, in theory, an objection to the success of democracies in resolving their existential and representational problems, but simply an indicator of the limit of their spread, perhaps only for now, perhaps for much longer.

Many believe, above all in the West, that Russia and China are moving towards a democracy they feel will probably, or in some cases surely, come to fruition, although they don't know when it will arrive or the form this transition they see as inevitable will take. And they may be right. But it's not clear that they are, and it's important to consider the alternatives.

Russia lived under an authoritarian regime we will call mixed, between traditional and modern, from the time of Peter the Great's reforms at the beginning of the 18th century through World War I. This represents two centuries of experience, ones which were certainly tormented but with notable achievements (in economy and culture, for example).¹⁵ To this we must add, small detail, a totalitarian regime that lasted throughout the 20th century; a regime that was greeted with varying (and often very high) levels of enthusiasm by a large part of the most sophisticated and educated European intelligentsia imaginable. It is also true that this regime probably had some twenty million victims among the population of the Russian Empire rechristened, provisionally, as the Soviet Union.¹⁶ This is a significant number of victims and,

¹⁴ Gray (2002).

¹⁵ Figes (2003)

¹⁶ According to the calculations of the authors of *The Black Book of Communism*. Courtois *et. al.* (1997: 8).

spread over seventy or eighty years, affected five consecutive generations: their habits, their mentality, their expectations, and their hopes.

The communist regime fell in 1990 and, given that we are now at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, this means that the transition towards democracy has lasted, so far, nearly twenty years. However, in fact, what we are facing is more of a hybrid state, somewhere between democracy and authoritarianism. The leadership, firmly established in power, apparently for many years, emphasizes continuity with the past, through their words and gestures as well as their work.¹⁷ Some observers point out that the Kremlin directly manages a considerable number of companies, which make up one-third of the country's Gross Domestic Product, not counting the resources in the hands of businesspeople with links to the ruling political class. There doesn't seem to be a clear delimitation between the market and the state. Furthermore, the regime is giving the population a moderate degree of economic prosperity and a so-called political stability, which critics understand to be the start up of an obligatorily unanimous creation mechanism. For this reason, they receive considerable popular support in elections, or rather, according to the opposing viewpoint, force this support to a high degree.¹⁸ It is clear that such a system, of an oligarchical nature with the acquiescence of the masses, can consolidate and last not necessarily five generations (like in the Soviet Union) but one or two (and if we can say one or two, why not, with the same degree of plausibility, four or six?).

In the case of China, the totalitarian regime was much shorter, just under half a century, although it had many more victims: somewhere around sixty million.¹⁹ This took place against a historical background of some millennia of governments we could call authoritarian, with highly sophisticated bureaucratic organization and ramifications extending over enormous areas and affecting huge numbers of people. This history is made up of a long tradition of alternating cycles of political stability and confusion; in the end it is the history of twenty-six dynasties over twenty-two centuries, all overthrown violently. This occurred against a backdrop of a certain economic, social and cultural stability, if we look at it in terms of centuries. However, the last century has seen profound social upheaval, with fifty years of political disorder (and foreign invasions) in the first half, and totalitarian order, shaken by "great leaps

¹⁷ According to some observers, we would be facing the execution of a great strategy of power on the part of some bodies of Soviet power, which the fiasco of Gorbachov's perestroika somewhat marginalized, but who took advantage of the hectic nineties to regain some control of the situation, culminating in the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Their strategy pointed to a reconfiguration of the balance of power between these bodies and the previous group of oligarchies around a great political reaffirmation of Russia in the international sphere. For a critical reading of this general evolution of events, which emphasizes the Soviet state apparatus's large-scale strategy to recover power, see Wolton (2008), and for a critical analysis and first-hand observation of the workings of state power and its relations with society in the first decade of the 21st century, see Politkovskaïa (2005).

¹⁸ For a reading of the 2007/2008 electoral process from this point of view, see Mendras, Orechkine, Lallemand (2008: 2 ff).

¹⁹ Curtois *et al.* (1997: 8, 539 ff).

forward” and a “cultural revolution”; all of which has probably led to an enormous confusion of memory.²⁰

In this case, the decision of Deng Xiao-Ping to drive the transition from socialism towards a single market economy, with few concessions to democracy,²¹ has resulted in an experiment able to adapt to current circumstances and last quite a long time. Maintaining a growth rate of around 10 percent per year (8.4% in 2000 and 11.5% in 2007), and thus multiplying the Gross Domestic Product in ten years, isn't a minor detail.²² Although some experts believe that China's GDP will be on par with the United States by 2020 instead of 2012 (according to a recent correction by the World Bank),²³ what is surprising is that it seems to be just within reach. And there are some who estimate the number of people who feel they have participated in economic prosperity, which would have been unimaginable for the previous generation, to be roughly 800 million Chinese. This figure is not to be taken lightly.

This happens within a system with a highly unequal distribution of power. The Communist Party and the state control a large part of the country's economic resources;²⁴ and the political resources, of course, are in the hands of the Communist Party and its 73 million members (5 percent of the population), whose ranks have gained 2 million new members per year since the party was opened up to private businesspeople in 2001. The view of a “communist party of private businesspeople” can only surprise those who believe in calling a spade a spade, which was the rule Confucius followed. However the more modern generations of leaders and cadres of the Chinese Communist Party employ considerable semantic flexibility, allowing them to say, and tell themselves, that socialism is the market and that the party's monopoly on power is democracy. This gives the course of words an Orwellian touch that, for the moment, doesn't seem to impede the course of matters towards a point that is not quite clear.

Naturally there is some resistance, which can be seen in the rate of savings among Chinese families, around 40 percent of their income (as a comparison, in Spain the rate is approximately 10 percent) suggesting a profound lack of trust in what is to come, which they must prepare for ahead of time (which is in line with a family strategy of placing members abroad, whenever possible).²⁵ Naturally there can be pressure from these emerging classes to express themselves through dissident political voices, or of workers to improve their

²⁰ On one hand, this could give people a different temporal perspective than that commonly found in the West, as it is more prolonged. On the other, there are a number of observers who demonstrate the difficulties recent generations have in expressing their historical memory, including that of the recent communist past and that of their religious traditions (Sorman, 2007), which could be connected to the destruction of old monuments and works of art (on this last topic, see the testimony of Verdier 2003).

²¹ See the testimony of Sorman (2007) and Domenach (2007).

²² Although one could question how precise these statistics are, and point out that this pace of growth is similar to that of Japan and the “Asian tigers” during their economic boom. (Sorman 2007, 173 ff). Testimonies on the problematic nature of the Chinese economic boom can be found, for example, in Kahn and Yardley (2007) and Oster (2007).

²³ And that its part of the global GDP is 10 percent, not 15.

²⁴ Domenach (2007: 196).

²⁵ Domenach (2007).

conditions, or of the population as a whole to request better healthcare and education. And this pressure can be combined with the proclivity of authoritarian governments to exaggerate their ability to control the agenda of problems, neglecting social infrastructure, quality in education and research, and a service-based economy. However it isn't unthinkable, either, that a good part of these demands could be satisfied, to some degree, by an apparatus of power (political and economic, in relative harmony) that sharpens its methods and ingeniously softens its procedures, in the middle and long term, without losing control of the situation. In any case, this game may last a long time; and from a millenary perspective, it could last centuries.

2.3 UNITED STATES, DEMOCRATIC SUPERPOWER, AND DELIBERATION DIFFICULTIES

Western democracies don't have the same multi-millenary perspective, and much less such a dynamic and peremptory democracy as that found in the US, which always looks to the present and the future, always rushing around and worrying about "not wasting time." If anyone sees the moment as fleeting, it is this country; and, nevertheless, its original imprint is essential to understanding this nation.

Americans have a democratic state with a historically proven ability to solve their existential and representational problems to a great extent at the time when they appear. A state that has adapted to what seems to be a constant mutation of growth over two or three centuries, punctuated with some large-scale crises like the Civil War. Each new generation must find its own balance, which isn't easy as it depends on the country's core, and society as a whole, being consistent and having a clear direction, which isn't always the case. That direction implies a model and, in this case, the model is located, precisely, in the past. It is a matter of remaining loyal to this model, of following in the path marked by the establishment of the British colonies in the 17th century and the reconfiguration of the country in the second half of the 18th century,²⁶ reflected in the Constitution, which has experienced and incorporated a series of successive crises that haven't really altered its initial trajectory. The model of a civil society in a broad sense, subjected to the decentralized rule of law, together with a market economy and a plethora of associations against a backdrop of a culture imbued with the Christianity and liberal humanism of the time. Staying true to its origins is being loyal, roughly speaking and with the corresponding variants and nuances, to that original imprint.

The United States can be seen today, from the outside, as a great democracy that attempts to spread its model throughout the world, or as a superpower that tries to control it.²⁷ However this reading of the country overestimates the ability of its political system to carry out its attempts, and even to set the

²⁶ Baylin (1992).

²⁷ Obviously both goals can be interlinked ("the advance of democracy is recognized as a strategic priority in our time," for the United States and the European Union, as they express in their joint meetings); however, in the long run, their links are weak and the effects, ambiguous; thus, over time, the spread of democracy can favor a re-balancing of power.

direction of the nation as a whole. This system's design imposes a division and separation of power and implies a system of checks and balances. The presidency must deal with the two houses of Congress, the Senate and the House of Representatives, made up of more than five-hundred politicians who act more like political businesspeople mired in a permanent re-election campaign than disciplined members of the parties in question. All of them have to deal with a complex and uncontrollable court system. To this we must add the states, which consider themselves sovereign in their own sphere of influence, local administrations and countless independent governmental agencies. The president himself only controls the executive branch to a certain extent because each department has its own margin for maneuverability and agenda. It must be said that each and every one of these political agents, and the political system as a whole, operates under the framework of an open market economy with international projection, and in a permanent struggle with civil society, including associations, churches, academic communities, professions, trade unions and lobbies of all types, in addition to the media.

In the background, there is a varied and fluctuating state of opinion of a society that devotes fragmented and selective attention to public issues. It is a society that applies a good dose of common sense and pragmatism to solving its practical problems, is moderately involved in common issues at the municipal and state levels and used to participating in numerous political elections, is highly participative in associations and churches, has a mid-to-high level of education, and is used to discussing and defending its viewpoints. Regarding presidential (and legislative) elections, the trend over the past decades has been for two-thirds of the electorate to make the effort to register to vote and two-thirds of registered voters to actually go to the polls, after ample opportunities to observe the candidates during campaigns that easily last more than a year, exposed to incessant scrutiny from the media and endless public debates before all types of audiences.

All of this leads to a system that the people criticize, at times bitterly, and at the same time believe works relatively well. In fact, this has gone hand in hand with, and fostered, an extraordinarily dynamic economy, and has solved, only in the past century, such large-scale problems as two world wars and a so-called Cold War, in addition to multiple internal struggles.

If we focus on more recent times, we still observe a similar tendency towards both criticizing and believing in the system. Over the past fifteen years, the political class, media and elite have become somewhat polarized, but this hasn't penetrated the social body (see below, chapter 5). Even in the apparently dramatic elections of 2000, which gave George Bush Jr. the presidency over Al Gore, the candidates' positions weren't so different in terms of foreign or domestic policy. Regarding foreign policy, the trend was to maintain the traditional oscillation in dealing with the post-cold-war period, swinging from unilateralism to multilateralism, and resolving any crises that came up *ad hoc*. In domestic policy, both parties and candidates, rhetoric and nuances aside, were on the same ground as President Clinton and the Republican Congress of 1996 with the reform of the welfare system. Only one year after these elections, when the attack on the Twin Towers radically changed the global scenario, the response was practically unanimous, and a good part of that consensus still

holds today, after a long and tormented adjustment process in the various phases of the conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁸

It is true that the wear and tear of the events, however, is such that many observers believe there to be a vague and perhaps profound dissatisfaction with the way the American democracy works.

As an example, let's look at the testimony of William Cohen and Sam Nunn, two top politicians, one from the Republican Party and one from the Democratic Party, who have written together on the issue.²⁹

In their text they point out that, according to recent surveys, roughly 70 percent of Americans believe that their country is moving in the wrong direction; and they believe that this implies the people are calling into question what they call "our national purpose, spirit, credibility and competence," and possibly, above all, that of the political class, including the government and presidential candidates. They express their concern for a presidential campaign that seems to slip into trivial and partisan debates, and wish they would focus their attention on the big picture (the war underway, energy problems, science and technology, balanced budgets, family savings and infrastructures). Theirs is a warning, with a civic and non-partisan spirit, of what we can call, in our terms, the existential and representational crises of the American democracy today.

Their warning doesn't sound unreasonable or inappropriate if we consider, on one hand, the difficulty this country and system, whose complexity I quickly discussed before, faces in focusing its attention, and, on the other hand, a cumulative series of unresolved or only partially resolved problems.

In fact, the United States didn't foresee the implosion of the Soviet Union until the end of the 1980s and didn't foresee that of Iran until the end of the 1970s. It didn't know how to manage the window of opportunity that opened up between 1990 and 2001.

Its presidents (Clinton particularly) got lost in the minutia and didn't see the problem of Islamic fundamentalism coming. If we look at the long term, we must recognize that this country has put up with the Palestinian problem for fifty years, being dragged along behind the situation.

If we look at the latest interventions, we must say that this country has been able to carry out lightning campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, only to find itself mired in their clumsy handling of the postwar period, and, it seems, disregarding relevant inside information like the political plan prepared by the Department of State or the number of troops required by the Pentagon. Ergo, the seemingly inevitable conclusion: either, faced with such problems, they didn't have the right information, or they didn't know how to correctly process it. Delving deeper into this issue, all of this suggests reasonable doubt as to the country's intelligence, military and administrative systems, firstly, and as to the

²⁸ For example, the Democratic candidates in the 2008 elections tested the waters before condemning the intervention in Iraq and before committing to setting a date for troops to leave that country.

²⁹ In the *International Herald Tribune* on January 4, 2008.

accumulated wisdom of its academic, corporate and media establishments, secondly.

We find ourselves here before a paradoxical situation. On one hand, in a comparison to Europe that is favorable to the United States, this country seems to have the resources for, tradition of and desire for responsible leadership. Responsible because it responds to the country's challenges, and because its government answers to the people. However, on the other hand, recent international events highlight the US ruling class's limited intelligence and understanding of the situation, at least the global situation, the effects of which are felt with ever-intensifying force.

In fact, some observers have even pointed out that only the capacity of ordinary people, the man on the street, to deal with problems immediately, using common sense, drive and self-confidence, have made it possible for the country and its government, including its military apparatus, to move ahead when they have found themselves mired in compromising situations "with the worst possible policies."³⁰ According to this, it would seem that, on one hand, the government, the establishment, will never truly understand how the world works. Perhaps because their great power leads them to confuse their desires with reality and imagine a world in their likeness. And, on the other, that the leaders' blind spots, or visual limitations, could be compensated for by the clarity of ordinary citizens, businesspeople, and the lower ranks of their organizations.

The final effect of these summary reflections may be mixed. On one hand, playing down the problem of the malaise of democracy if we think of the overall path of the American democracy in the long term. And, on the other, dramatizing the difficulties of collective deliberation and decision-making when operating in a complex and distinct political system facing the arduous and implacable issues of the present. Issues that, incidentally, can't be faced by simply rushing to "identify the enemy." It is clear that at times the country recovers its direction and focuses its attention because it is up against a dangerous adversary that forces it to do so, obligating the country to define itself *a contrario*: the opposite of Hitler's Germany, or of communism, or, now, of so-called Islamic fascism, for example. However, if our adversaries can help us realize who we are and establish our own identity, they can also, at times, cloud our view. Or we can choose the wrong adversary; or fight with the shadows.

2.4 A STILL-VAGUE EUROPE, AND A LONG INDECISIVE GERMANY

EUROPE AS AN EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS

Europe is like a laboratory of democracies with different problems; but, to start off, Europe itself can be seen as a *sui generis* democratic political entity, in a prolonged process of becoming such.

³⁰ Kaplan (2007: 6) See, in general, the testimony of Kaplan on how lower-ranked American soldiers acted in the different current combat scenarios (Kaplan 2007).

The Europe we know isn't the post-war Europe that started in the 1950s. It is a Europe rooted much further in the past although current imagery tends to start from the period of intense national rivalries in the second half of the 18th century, and all of the 19th century, leading up to the European civil wars of the 20th century.³¹ These wars ended up subsuming national rivalries in the confrontation with communist and fascist totalitarian regimes, and, to top it off, between the former and liberal democracy. First, four years of war led to the collapse of a number of states, and extreme fatigue, demoralization and resentment in numerous societies. Then, a political struggle, with localized civil wars (in Russia, Germany, Austria and Spain, in particular) pitted totalitarianism against democracy, with complicated alliances between the two. And, at the end, six years of total war and catastrophe. Plus the forty years of Cold War that allowed totalitarianism to endure in the eastern half of continental Europe.

One cannot be reborn from such an experience like a phoenix, with the help of a common economic miracle. One survives such an experience only with internal injuries that require prolonged treatment, in the hopes of a difficult metamorphosis.

It isn't surprising that the different countries in continental Europe, each with its own characteristics, have initiated a process to share their problems in an attempt to help each other. Many have complicated historical memories and narratives of their participation in terrible violence. Or of silence, fatigue, hopelessness and lack of drive. Many have had to reshape their role in the world. Those who had colonies lost them. Those who entertained dreams of grandeur had to make due with symbolic gestures and maintenance.

Over time, a united Europe has given them a broader horizon. However, at the same time, it has led them onto a strange and uncomfortable path of transition from states with nearly full sovereignty to members of a supranational community that absorbs a substantial part of that sovereignty. From *polis* to *cosmopolis*. This process has been underway for half a century and may last who knows how many centuries more. In the meantime, the main political space for democracy, the principal meeting point between the many and the few, between governors, the elite and citizens, continues to be that of national democratic states, which distorts the perception of the problems, given that the lines of political responsibility have become blurred.

If we focus on the European Union, we find ourselves faced with a contradictory situation. This is, in theory, a political entity. The essence of politics is the capacity it gives those who participate in it to identify a common adversary, or, to put it another way, an "other" with different interests, who they can put up with for a time but will eventually have to face. In other words, foreign projection is an essential part of politics. However, the European Union, at this point, hasn't yet learned how to manage its foreign projection. This suggests the conclusion that it isn't really, or can hardly be considered, a political entity.

³¹ Nolte (2000)

The problem isn't a lack of robust resources for political defense, but a lack of intelligence in designing those policies and the will to use existing resources. It isn't a matter of being right in terms of the small things: avoiding the mistake of untimely intervention in Kosovo, the lack of personnel in Afghanistan, logistical failure in sending an expeditionary body to Africa, carelessness in preventing the genocide in Rwanda, a misunderstanding in taking sides on the Security Council, or indecisiveness in establishing a policy for conduct in Russia, Iran or the Middle East. It's not about the "little things" because in the end there is a long tradition (more than half a century) of only partial decision-making and of living under external protection, of a deficit of *demos* and of ruling elite, and an unclear identity.

In Europe, decisions seem harder to make and, frequently, are put off, due in part to the complexity of the problems and in part to the lack of clarity of those who must solve them and the criteria they must apply in doing so because there are many actors coordinated in a confusing fashion. The rules for decision-making are highly complex and many decisions are left to chance in open-ended processes. The result is a rather wide-reaching pathology of indecision or partial decision-making.

A first reading of the situation suggests a symptom of this is the way the European Union has lost itself in the ambiguity of its institutional architecture, in a fundamental and endemic way, over the past half century, while the debate among federalists, confederalists and those in favor of the so-called "variable geometries" continues. A symptom of this is the doubt as to whether or not there should be or will one day be a European *demos*, leaving the matter of support for a European *cratos* (power) in limbo. A symptom of this is that the relative task of a European foreign policy is defined and redefined in minimal terms; because it is well known that in a 27-nation European Union it is difficult to find an important foreign policy issue for which there aren't three or four different positions. A symptom of this is the spirit of procrastination and distortion, and therefore of dubious good faith, with which the problem of incorporating Turkey into the European Union has been faced. Many see this problem as impossible to solve given that, on one hand, expectations have been raised that many believe it unseemly to dash and, on the other, it is taken for granted that, at the moment of truth, at least three or four countries would reject Turkey's membership,³² which would be enough to impede the process as their formal opposition would have the tacit, concealed complicity of other governments and the majority opinion. A symptom of this is that, when taking a stand on burning international issues that hit close to home, like those of the Middle East or the Near East, European diplomacy tends to adopt a low profile.³³

³² France, for the moment, has committed to calling a referendum on this issue.

³³ Or (according to my personal interpretation of the declarations made by a high ranking foreign policy head from a European country during a meeting in Madrid in February 2008), to confess in *petit comité* that "fortunately no one has asked our position on the Palestinian situation," followed by a sigh of relief, and "fortunately the nuclear issue in Iran can be resolved because there isn't a problem" (if we heed the conclusions of a recent report from a US intelligence agency), followed again by a sigh of relief. A curious way of taking charge of foreign affairs, between sighs of relief at not having to do so.

At the core of European indecision, and distortion, regarding foreign (and domestic) policy, lays the absence of a collective pan-European decision-making body. This is a democratic deficit that affects everything the European Union does, and is such not in the normal interpretation, according to which European political representatives don't have enough power in choosing the executive branch. This interpretation hides a fallacy, as it silences or conceals the democratic legitimacy of the governments that do choose the president of the Commission.

In the end, there is a democratic deficit for the simple reason that there is a lack of European *demos*, which is the communal support for democracy, and as such, is inherent in the system. Something that doesn't exist (a European *demos* yet to be created) can hardly lead (exercise its power, *cratos*). In fact, for 50 years, Europe has been constructed from the top down by a group of elites (politicians, dignitaries, civil servants, experts, businesspeople, ideologues, journalists) who have decided *ab initio* to indefinitely slow down the social integration process that would have brought with it the creation of a homogenous space, and led to shared experiences and symbols without which it is impossible for a people to exist. Because everything has been done with the aim of leaving things well tied up in the local levels, making everything compatible with the relatively small size of the national states.

As a result, a common European public space hasn't yet been created. The one that exists is still a compartmentalized space made up of a segment of the elite that is more or less pan-European or cosmopolitan and a mosaic of national local spaces. The institutional and cultural mechanisms for this common space are still conspicuous only in their absence, which, to start with, is reflected in the media and the so-called cultural industry,³⁴ and, continuing in this line, the inability to once and for all accept English as a *lingua franca*, as an inevitable part of daily life. Rejection of this *lingua franca* is just as shocking as the obvious reticence of both of the countries that supposedly make up the substantial core of Europe to learn each others' language: of Germans to learn and use French, not to mention that of the French to learn and use German.³⁵ Likewise, the foundation of this common public space is lacking, meaning that of shared social and economic experiences because there has been no effort commensurate with the importance of the issue to ensure the social and professional mobility of all Europeans.

In general, with regard to the European constitution, the messages coming out of national *demoi* are unclear. They are that of an *anima confusa*. The nations tend to be more European in proportion to their belief that this construction will help improve their own position in Europe and give them a grandiose position as regional leaders, calming their anxiety at not feeling at home in their own skin and occasionally being fed up with themselves. Today, the possibility that a loose confederation of relatively free countries, with average quality governors and elite and an oscillating public opinion, can develop a robust political lifestyle in the long term isn't very high.

³⁴ Swaan (2006 and 2007)

³⁵ As pointed out, in a lamenting tone, René Girard in a recent work: Girard (2007: 164).

It isn't surprising that this situation leads to public detachment, which leads to low turnout in European elections. There has been a clear downward trend in participation in the latest European and national elections (40 percent lower participation in European elections in Sweden, and 23 percent less in Spain, for example).³⁶ Furthermore, it is common that those who do go to the polls do so with their minds firmly focused on local affairs. Nor is it surprising, thus, that under these circumstances the tendency is to return to local politics as that which, finally, deals with the real issues of politics and where a true meeting of citizens and the political class can take place in such conditions that the citizens' demands for politicians to take responsibility are a reality and not an entelechy.

GERMANY, AND AN *EXCURSUS* FOR THEORETICAL DEBATE

The difficulty of European decision-making has a second cause, which stems from a lack of drive on behalf of the most powerful European countries, which should exert their leadership. Part of the difficulty lies in the very origin of the post-war system of European states and, in particular, that of Germany. The German problem, that of what to do with Germany in the post-war period, has been the main driving force behind the construction of Europe. How to bring together the raw materials and energy in such a way that the Germans would participate in the group; whether or not to establish a defense system that would incorporate a possible German army; how to do so; how to ensure a form of commercial and cultural consensus that would reduce future tensions between Germany and France, or other countries; how to incorporate the Germans' technical and organizational abilities, and balance their design for a social market economy with a project of prosperity for Europe as a whole.

That said, the corollary of having Germany at the heart of the project is recognizing their *de facto* leadership or co-leadership of that project. And here the problem has consisted not so much in the fact that the rest were reticent to recognize this leadership but in that the Germans themselves didn't know how to manage their leadership potential, in their weakness in doing so. The result of their experience has been Germany (Western Germany for a long time) settling for the status of a country that was only partially sovereign, which took for granted that its foreign policy needed the *placet*, first, of the occupying powers and, later, of allies that watched it closely. They have grown used to solving things in the benign climate created by the protection of others, of the United States and NATO, from outside forces. And, thus protected, of benefitting from a favorable institutional and economic framework that, combined with hard work, organizational skills and a free market, allowed them to transform their total defeat into a triumph of prosperity and social cohesion. And all of this without having to look too closely at their own past; although we can think that, sometimes, in not assuming responsibility for the past, we lessen our responsibility for the present and for the future.

If you will allow me a brief *excursus* to debate political theory, I will point out that these circumstances help us understand the evolution of the main trends in

³⁶ Judt (2005: 730).

German political thought in the post-war period. On one hand, the disenchanting liberalism of political scientists and sociologists from the so-called Joachim Ritter school and the modern disciples of Carl Schmitt, from the 1950s and 1960s, contrasts with the decisionism and state activism postulated in the period between the two wars, and deflates the expectations projected regarding the ability of the state to solve the people's problems, distancing itself from a long tradition of German political thought. This trend culminates in the positions of Niklas Luhmann, who saw social reality as a system of links between subsystems, each of which followed its own logic and attempted to reduce the complexity of the environment in which it operates in order to satisfy its own goals. The state or the political subsystem lacks meaning as a mechanism that governs the whole, gives it any special direction or is even responsible to any significant degree for its cohesion. The most relevant segment of a political system would be the bureaucracy responsible for detecting social problems and solving them before they destabilize the whole.³⁷

On the other hand, a belief like that of Jürgen Habermas, and that of radical and critical schools of thought in the 1970s, and even the 1980s, sets out from the opposite premise to reach a position that is to some extent convergent with the previous one. Here liberal politics of the time is understood as a response to manipulation strategies and instrumental rationality moved by the interests of capitalist profits and bureaucratic power, and is contrasted with the political ideal of a community of deliberation and discourse anchored in the alternative world of a life-system. This has consequences in terms of intervention in real politics, which tends to be marginal and vague. In effect, that attitude supposes a type of "political romanticism," through which agents refuse to measure themselves against reality. In real life, decisions depend on debates that can only take into account certain information, and is processed by agents with limited abilities for analysis and whose perspective incorporates interests and values, ideas and passions, in a difficultly dissociable manner. Honing this perspective can only be the goal of an interminable task, and the problem of the truth of the positions in conflict must be posed in terms of an indefinite inquiry, which must run parallel to decisions that can't wait indefinitely; although one can always lose oneself in academic seminars, at the expense of intervening in real politics only marginally.³⁸

All of this suggests a vocation or nostalgia, on behalf of this generation, for a life lived in parenthesis, or in an imprecise territory. In time, it would be located after the generation that made terrible decisions, and that which only made decisions partially. In social space, it would be ensconced in the protected spaces of an affluent society's public education and welfare systems. Their worry for making any real, logically risky, decision about the future is understandable. We could also understand their view of current society as a "society of risk," leading us to believe that previous society experienced a substantially lower

³⁷ Müller (2007: 166 ff). On a view of the state as a semantic artifact corresponding to a self-description of the political system, see Luhmann (1995: 426 ff).

³⁸ And probably with a distorted understanding of it; for example, seeing the defects of Western Germany, in that time, under a microscope, and not seeing the comparatively more serious problems of those who are a (very) little further over, like for example East Germany during the same period.

level of risk, which seems to be symptomatic of an exaggerated perception of risk and a tendency to overestimate danger.³⁹

All of this suggests a certain reticence to assume responsibility, which in real history they seemed to overcome at the last moment when the adversary they were facing, the Soviet Union (along with the eastern-block socialist countries), crumbled and, then, Chancellor Kohl found strength out of weakness to dare to propose reunification.⁴⁰ This was the result in part of initiative and in part of an act of abstention: that of demoralized forces of repression who abstained from their daily routine of impeding the free passage of the people and, in this case, shooting at them. The very image of the “fall of the Berlin wall” evokes the idea of something the people wait for to start falling before they finish tearing it down.

3. CURRENT DIAGNOSTICS: (B) A CONTRAST

3.1 FRANCE AND THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBALIZATION

In this section, I will focus in closer detail on the case of two European countries, France and Spain. The former could be compared to Germany; its weakness in decision-making is similar to that of Germany, and this shared weakness is probably connected to the vague, indecisive and slow nature of the construction of Europe. But I prefer to contrast this case to that of Spain, not only because in both examples I have chosen to focus on public policies (while in the German case I strayed into the debate on theoretical issues), but also because I aim to use this contrast between France and Spain to call attention to the different types of existential and representational problems of democracy when these are defined against a broader or more narrow horizon, and when internal conflicts are stoked up or dampened down.

Background on some doubtful narratives regarding France’s place in the world and its identity

France has high levels of per capita income and GDP, research and technology, higher education, and military, economic, cultural and diplomatic projection in the world. Furthermore, France has a narrative that makes it proud of itself, in good part because it doesn’t question its identity, as its dramatic conflicts have metamorphosed in such a way that what, at the time, seemed like a struggle to the death between irreconcilable parties has become, over time, a complex game of complementary oppositions: Joan of Arc and the Revolution, Louis XIV and Clemenceau. They also have a pleasant lifestyle, led by prudent and flexible people, with *savoir vivre*, with parties somewhat given to rhetorical flourishes but that have a sense of opportunity and are in tune with the ways of the world.

³⁹ Beck (1992). There is also possibly a trend to undervalue the relative importance of the attitude of those who perceive the risk and the cultural and political factors that affect that perception (Douglas 1994: 55 ff).

⁴⁰ Naturally, one could counter-argue that the *Ostpolitik* was an initiative and decision of important change although we could also interpret it as part of a strategy of *modus vivendi* and a prudent adjustment of the *status quo*.

Nowadays, however, the French find themselves in a difficult situation, looking to the present and the future. They can perhaps solve their problems if everyone pitched in, but the issues can't be solved individually. They have the feeling that globalization is a threat which calls into question their place in the world and their very identity. In order to deal with this phenomenon, they must subdue a background of doubtful narratives that hinder their understanding of the situation. Perhaps these served their purpose at another time, but now they are confusing and make the people accept wishes as reality.

In the past, France was able to entertain a variety of dreams. At the end of the World War, they forgot that the majority had accepted the initial defeat and cooperated, and came to (nearly) believe that they had liberated themselves, or that the forced loss of the colonies had (almost) been a concession of the people to republican and universalist values, in line with their principles. These fictions have both held up and been concealed in good part thanks to the words and gestures of a charismatic leader like General De Gaulle, who acted as if he was imposing his will on fate, and resolved the conflict with reality with a shrug and an imaginative choice of words: not correcting names so that the words would fit reality, as Confucius wished, but by manipulating names to confuse reality. The generations of the 1940s and 1950s managed to get by with these semantic alterations. Young people in the 1960s and 1970s found their own way to blur perception, in part with their ostensible ideological rhetoric and in part with their pragmatic way of advancing their careers through their "long march" (not exactly like that of Mao Zedong) through the institutions.

Both parties, throughout the Cold War, believed that they could distance themselves from the Western alliance, only because the Soviets couldn't reach French borders without first coming up against US and NATO troops and nuclear apparatuses. It was difficult to prolong this dream during the euphoria stirred by the end of the Cold War, when, along with it, the possibility of Soviet attack had also disappeared. In fact, quite instinctively, François Mitterrand expressed his inclination to maintain the *status quo ante* and his lack of enthusiasm for the German reunification when he confessed, "I won't have to do anything to prevent the reunification of Germany; the Soviets will do it for me." As, for analogous reasons, he expressed his reticence to Eastern European countries joining the European Union.⁴¹ But Germany has been reunified, and the European Union has grown to include Central and Eastern Europe.

To this small history of confusion regarding foreign affairs there are other corresponding difficulties experienced today in France in integrating immigrants. The problems weren't so great when integrating Italian and Polish immigrants a century ago. But the country has accepted new immigrants, above all Muslims from the Maghreb, setting them apart and at the same time trying to pretend that they weren't doing so. They have given this group the status of neither belonging to nor being excluded from society, in fact if not in discourse, for a long time.

France welcomed immigrants from northern Africa under the terms of exchange, using them as cheap labor just as they used the West to improve their

⁴¹ Judt (2005: 637, 719).

quality of life and working conditions. It was taken for granted that this was a short-term agreement, that Europeans could function without them, and that they would return home after their countries had developed. Because fifty years ago the perception was, in this regard, the same as today, of underdeveloped countries that would join the developed world in a generation or two. This has generated multiple and contradictory experiences, which are useful for the economy and have a mixed effect on the welfare and political systems, and a certain cultural misunderstanding. Businesspeople have had cheap labor; the elderly, caregivers; and civil servants and NGOs their own subjects to care for.

However, on the other hand, this reciprocal use, so easy to understand in economic terms, took place between Christian Europeans that were more or less secularized but didn't really know that was the case, and Mediterranean Muslims who were becoming ever more acutely aware of their nature. So that, to top it off, only a certain obfuscation has been able and is able to blind the French (and Europeans in general, given that the phenomenon affects Europe as a whole)⁴² to the profound cultural differences between European societies, all the result of Christianity and classical heritage, and Muslim societies. These societies aren't "assimilable" into each other, in the normal sense of the word because their cultural identities, if genuine, are too profound. They can only assimilate if these identities vanish and, paradoxically, there is nothing left to assimilate. What must be explored are the possibilities, in practice, of seeing to what extent and how this cultural divergence allows or impedes these groups from making up a common political community, with a public space that allows for coherent debate and widely shared discourse on the common good; for example, on foreign policy, on the status of women, family rights or conversion to one religion or the other. The truth is that for there to be a well-ordered political community that is capable of action, a minimalist *modus vivendi*, the two groups merely putting up with each other, is not enough. Two profoundly different societies co-existing "as next-door neighbors" is an inferior method of living together, which supposes tolerance among people who define each other as mutually indifferent and lacking interest. This doesn't favor the creation or functioning of a political community, which requires constant political dialogue.

THE DISCOURSE OF POLITICIANS, ITS REACH AND ITS LIMITS: THE SARKOZY MOMENT AND THE VÉDRINE REPORT

For many years, France has been suffering from a feeling of malaise, which is reflected in the abundant literature on the country's decadence. However it isn't the only country⁴³ suffering from this feeling, which is quite common in the rest of continental Europe. A time has come when these feelings have come front and center in the arena of public opinion, and politicians have made the issue a central topic in their struggle for power.

The most recent presidential elections (in 2007) gave the presidency to Nicolás Sarkozy, whose discourse was formulated with the intention of responding to

⁴² The case of Turkish immigrants in Germany, for example, is similar, although not identical, to that of the Maghreb immigrants in France. See Pérez-Díaz, Álvarez Miranda and Chuliá (2004).

⁴³ Baverez (2004); in contrast with the more hopeful tone found in Baverez (2007).

this state of opinion. One of the first acts of this new president was to convene people from all schools of thought to advise him on the task of facing what is considered the country's existential challenge: maintaining its identity and strengthening its presence in the world through globalization. And he asked former (Socialist) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hubert Védrine, to draft a report on this aspect of the situation,⁴⁴ which I will now use as a benchmark for a comment with which I highlight the reach and limits, or dark sides, of its diagnoses. Védrine linked the French's profound mistrust of globalization to their fear of losing their own identity and their status among nations. This is linked to the fear, he says, of a weakened state, to which they would feel connected due the ability it should have to reinforce their identity and status. However, in addition to this there is a certain cognitive and moral confusion. Védrine points out that half of the population understands how the economy works, which is a way of saying that the other half doesn't. This doesn't prevent them from managing themselves quite successfully if we look to the past, but it raises questions about the future. The truth is that, in this respect, the moral and emotional premises of French practical reasoning seem weak. They say they feel a vague sense of disgust towards the discourse of economic profit; they claim to be egalitarians; they have an intense desire for social protection and don't trust in the progress and science of other eras, or so Védrine believes.⁴⁵ But other Europeans have to listen to these declarations thinking *de te fabula narratur*. In other European countries, mistrust for globalization isn't normally any less, and many Europeans share the French's ambivalence and hesitation with regard to the market economy.

This confusion is fueled and strengthened by the media and the elite, and, in this sense, Védrine refers to the media system's intrinsic shortsightedness and catastrophism; once again, a reference that could be applied to many countries. He also alludes to a social and political elite that sends contradictory messages to society. Some segments of this elite are cosmopolitan and, let's say, fervently liberal. They are committed to a resolutely favorable attitude regarding globalization and refers to the masses with a certain condescension, hoping that they end up coming to their senses with a bit of leadership and pedagogy. And all of this is done without ever taking their eyes off the prize: their own interests. However other parts of the elite are more local oriented, and while absorbed by their habitual task of moving up the ladder, do not lose sight of their own interests in terms of globalization either. In the end, both types of elite live in the same environment: perhaps they belong to the world the French call "*énarques*",⁴⁶ and their dependents, always so careful in controlling their (local) territory while they jockey for the best position on the world scene.

Védrine advocates a consensus around what he calls "the adoption of a globalization dynamic", which lays the groundwork for policies to adapt to this phenomenon and protect against it. Going into some detail, Védrine refers to a series of things that "must be done," a work agenda. To start off, we must adapt to globalization and, at the same time, be alert and prepared for an unrealistic

⁴⁴ Védrine (2007).

⁴⁵ Idem, 15 ff.

⁴⁶ Alumni of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), where the country's technocratic (or "programmatic": Genieys 2007) elite are trained.

reading of open markets as an already present reality: we must move, we could say, from the Chicago School supposedly aligned with the neoliberals to a post-Chicago School presumably more attuned to the real world. Although objections could be raised that looking too closely at reality distorts it, and, in fact, in Védrine's reading, all his emphasis corresponds to his reticence towards the globalization process and the way this process tends to create open markets. He bases this on the supposition that we continue to be faced with a scenario of competitive national capitalist systems, perhaps similar to capitalism in the 18th century seen through Colbertist glasses, that of commercial rivalry.⁴⁷

Therefore, according to Védrine, we must protect ourselves against the lack of transparency and reciprocity, and against "sovereign funds" made up of companies dominated by public capital from other nation-states that try to participate in the country's own companies. And we must avoid financial crashes that can devastate a region, profession or sector; establish aid mechanisms; combine flexibility and security (flex-security), and do so through *ad hoc* procedures, based on the experience of others. Furthermore, we must keep our eyes peeled for the hypertrophy of the financial sphere.⁴⁸

As a result, when entering this mixed terrain of economic policy and diplomacy, we must develop, says Védrine, an intelligent relationship (a *rapport de forces*) with emerging countries, which not only want a place in the global economy but also on the world geopolitical scene. This implies the exercise of power and influence to demand they respect the rules of transparency and reciprocity, and those related to the environment, but also those that limit corruption and violence. This last issue requires effort and pressure that will take time,⁴⁹ as Védrine reminds us, and will require attention so as not to irritate developing countries (Russia, China and others) or their elite classes, who must be treated with kid gloves in order to avoid marring what is, for now, a good business climate, and who must be given time to put their affairs in order.

But all this that "must be done" requires another step with regard to who does it and with whom. Védrine, arriving at this point, points to a European actor, which would be the vehicle for French action. All of this must be done, he says, but in such a way that the European Union becomes "the most effective level of action in the process of globalization" and what's more, "the regulating power par excellence" in the world. Doing this is a matter of establishing a tradition of great pro-European ambitions, as was supposedly reflected in the Lisbon agenda of 2000. This agenda, observes Védrine, was too vague and adopted without any real commitment from the governments, without preparation of public opinion, and without measuring the economic, social and domestic policy implications; and thus the agenda hasn't met its goals.

So we are faced with a grandiose horizon, with many things to be done, which will lead to a vision of a single Europe, the world regulating power. Europe is supposed to carry out this strategy with a "western dimension" but not be immersed in a grand western strategy dictated by the United States. Védrine

⁴⁷ Studied by Istvan Hont (2005).

⁴⁸ *Idem*, 42 ff.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, 60 ff.

believes that US strategy tends towards simplicity, quite the opposite (it is supposed) of European complexity that (we must add) tends to lead to certain inaction. Americans also tend towards unilateralism: they go it alone and are hard to influence; which (it must be said) doesn't seem like a bad description of the ideal the French State would aspire to following Védérine's inspirations. Likewise, Védérine believes that the United States is often wrong, which seems to be somewhat true (see above) and something that the Americans themselves recognize frequently, although European errors should not go unnoticed either.

However the issue is: at the end of the day what advice can France and Europe, not being paragons of virtue themselves, give as they have less resources than the United States and, more importantly, are less willing to use them? Because the Europeans' problem isn't so much a lack of prudence as an excess of it. The European actor is indecisive, for now, because it isn't a single actor; it is the result of a conversation among, let's say, 27 actors. Henry Kissinger said that when he wanted to know Europe's position on a problem he didn't have a number to call and ask. European politicians imagine that by naming a representative, a "Mr. Europe," the problem would be solved; but this isn't the case if, when Mr. Europe receives a call, he hangs up and dials 27 times before giving an answer.

The attempt some countries make to take on a strong position of leadership is unviable; and, on the other hand, according to Védérine, the process of institutional integration over the past fifteen years, induced by the strategy to increase membership in the European Union driven by the United Kingdom and Germany, with France dragged along, has reached its end.⁵⁰ This is because the people can't go any further, as reflected in the 2005 referendums held in the Netherlands and France, and the general abstention in the latest European elections (2004: 57% abstention), and, before, the French, Danish and Irish reticence to ratify the Treaty of Maastricht.

One alternative would be a weak form of leadership under the guise of a *de facto* directory of responsible, able states that were decided to establish a robust foreign policy. States that were able to dominate the art of directing the orchestra of resources and local initiatives in their own countries (managing their internal discussion forums and citizen participation) and the art of negotiation (arbitrating agreements among the opposing interests of more than 200 states in the world and other innumerable non-state actors).⁵¹

Following this reasoning to its logical end, what we have, as a last resort, is a French nation that tries to influence the European Union and use EU resources but with its own, independent agenda (Europe but not pro-European, allied by not aligned). A France that is surely the French State and its environs; perhaps the state as a meeting point for a wider establishment, the French elite, with the contribution, one supposes, of society itself.

However we must still explain with what vision and objectives the actor in question will take on the risky venture of using its resources and deploying its arts. We must suppose that, not being before an exaltation of art for art's sake,

⁵⁰ Idem, 81 ff.

⁵¹ Idem, 111 ff.

such skill would be related to some end. And here we find a new deficit, this time in vision and goals. Because, if we must judge based on this reflection, the French state and its *énarques* seem to be like certain contemporary artists, with abundant technical resources but scarce inspiration. Yes, they have instrumental resources and knowledge (diplomats, lawyers, soldiers, scientists, companies, an alert public opinion), but do they know what is happening to them and where they are headed in the world? At the very least, Védérine doesn't seem to know, as he limits himself to restating numerous commonplace expressions: "the world is flat"⁵² and the economy is global, the geopolitical world is somewhere between unipolar and multipolar, a collision of civilizations is possible but not necessary. And to conclude, in a fit of syncretism, what we have is "a bit of everything" ("*un peu de tout cela, sans doute*"), and he finishes up by insisting on the need to safeguard French interests, prevent conflicts among powers and make a "livable and equal" world.⁵³

The flip side is that, setting aside criticism of the levity of his vision, Védérine's argument contains a reasonable core in that it opens up a wide horizon and avoids partisanship. It takes for granted that, in France, the state and general society accept responsibility for facing today's challenges, and in particular those challenges inherent in being-in-the-world. The challenges are serious, but the willingness to face them seems genuine. People feel the world is dangerous and are reluctant to "fall into the hands of destiny" although perhaps they know that aspiring to control destiny is excessive and trust in their ability to manage the situation in such a way that they adjust to things, thereby avoiding catastrophes, and that, in the process of trying, they will learn how to do things better.

The issue of the national state reappears here, occupying the place the classical *polis* tried to occupy: a place of responsibility for common challenges and a place of collective learning. In effect, historical experience suggests that, despite their limits, national states can, if they are of some quality (and cannot, if they lack it), acquire the precise skill and will to make crucial contributions to the task of adjusting to a confusing world, different from those that can be made by companies or associations. This imposes, thus, a complex and nuanced reading of the state. The state can become a parasitic and predatory agent; or, on the contrary, a responsible and effective agent, to the point of providing a unique institutional opportunity and for the political experience. This was the classical Greek viewpoint. Although, to do this, strong states must have the necessary resources, and that requires, precisely, a strong society with resources.

The Védérine report suggests that we are facing an ambivalent France. On one hand, it is uneasy with the course of events. Globalization overwhelms it. At the same time, it has the impression that, over these thirty years, many changes have taken place in the world and not so many in France, whose policy has been of minor adjustments, alterations and co-existence that have left a legacy of political maneuvers and pettiness, and, in the long run, a sensation of loss of influence and self-doubt.

⁵² Echoing Friedman (2006).

⁵³ Védérine (2007: 145)

However, on the other hand, there is a base of self-confidence, which is the result of their daily experience and a historical narrative that confirms it. In the end, it is a matter of a society possessed with a certain love for itself, which sets it apart from countries that, in their worst moments, can appear to be devoured by envy, low self-esteem, and a propensity towards self-destruction; three pathological traits (envy, low self-esteem and a propensity towards destruction and self-destruction) that are clearly linked.

To this base of healthy feelings, we must add, in the French case, a certain lucidity. In terms of this self-esteem, the country doesn't delegate responsibility to others in order to get their affairs in order and, regarding lucidity, doesn't try to submerge itself in Europe as a way to flee forward. Because they know that European democracy doesn't have much to give, given that the *demos* on which the *cratos*, or sovereign power, is based doesn't exist. The European *demos* doesn't exist, and it is being created at a glacial pace. Meanwhile, there are things to do in the complicated world of the moment: driving unity in the West, or other initiatives. Audacity, ingenuity, common sense, perseverance and other similar virtues can help make these and other initiatives a reality, perhaps, in the long term.

FRANCE AND SPAIN: A COMPARISON

Comparisons can at times be hateful and at others instructive. That of France and Spain may now be a case of the latter. France is trying to recover from some decades of a somewhat paralyzing cohabitation, putting its affairs in order so as to face the challenge of globalization, and do so, in some way, together. Time will tell what they achieve. Spain, on the other hand, seems more interested in breaking itself apart and more obsessed with its own local struggles.

The French have quite a bit of trust in the state. That said, the strong French State with resources is possible because French society is relatively strong and has resources. The fact that French society is strong means that its internal conflicts are not as intense as they seem if revolutionary rituals are taken literally (as an expression of revolutionary will) and not metaphorically (like Saturnalia). Which is another way of saying that there is a relatively high level of solidarity in France, perhaps higher than in Spain, perhaps because they love each other more or hate each other less. If French society has *amor sui*, if it loves itself, that means that it loves its neighbor, and in this society the art of loving is cultivated to create a sentimental education: developing positive feelings of daily culture and a curiosity for human things and beings. This sentimental education suggests a relatively healthy society.⁵⁴

Countries like Spain are, at least nowadays, relatively less healthy, precisely because they have less *amor sui*. Maybe the Spanish (or simply many or quite a few of them) don't believe that they deserve much love because, perhaps being familiar with themselves (as it could not be otherwise), they know themselves and, knowing themselves (careless and somewhat envious, or let's say, not very

⁵⁴ Although perhaps with a touch of *petit bourgeois à la Céline* ("Nobody is perfect", as the fox would sigh in *Le Petit Prince* by Saint-Exupéry: 1999, 72).

generous towards each other), they hold themselves in low esteem. Moreover, without a narrative they can be proud of (they were glorious but don't understand the reasons that accompanied that glory), they aren't comfortable with their history nor, thus, with their identity which is simply the correlative of that history. They doubt, even, when mentioning the name of their country, Spain, which the learned class of the moment tells them sounds more like a challenge, a war cry for internal usage, than something that unites them: this is why these learned people suggest expressions like "the Spanish State" or "this country", with the minimalist, condescending and slightly denigrating connotations it implies. And this shuts them up and they shut up. They don't mention themselves then. But the *nomen* has a substantial connection to the *numen*. Without a name, the country in question loses its numinosity, the force of its presence, overshadowing itself, unable to be called on nor to respond.

Perhaps this is why France, which names itself continuously, dares to take on tasks of some bearing, like the task of globalization, and can commit to them. Spain has turned its back on these tasks, busy destroying itself. Poised to fall into temptation, France can fall into its delusions of grandeur, and Spain, into a state where it doesn't even know if it exists. In France, the danger lies in vanity and obsessive self-attention; in Spain, envy and perhaps carelessness or laziness. But vanity is less destructive than envy because, while the vain show off their toys, the envious destroy them.

Both cases have their value and both can be learned from. From what occurs in France, we can learn how to piece back together an identity called into question and recover self-confidence; from what occurs in Spain, how internal fissures can consume a country, or how this can be avoided.

3.2 SPAIN AND THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNAL UNITY

FROM THE "SPANISH LESSON" TO THE "SPANISH CRISIS"?

In the case of France, it seems that Sarkozy attempts to solve his country's (existential) problems, of foreign policy and national identity, and to do so, convenes people from different parts of the political spectrum and asks for the public to listen to them, support their policies or disagree with them, making an informed decision and not letting their judgment be clouded by partisan simplifications from either side. It is supposed that a process of debates and reforms has been put in motion, which could be profound.⁵⁵

There are precedents of all this in Europe. Similar processes were observed in the United Kingdom in the 1960s, the Netherlands in the 1980s, and Sweden in the 1990s, leading to reforms that weren't questioned by the following governments.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ They could obviously not be so; today (February 2008) we are only in the first act.

⁵⁶ In fact, Tony Blair and the Labor Party have re-appropriated large parts of Margaret Thatcher's reforms. In the Swedish case, the continual reforms and adjustments to the welfare system by both Social Democrats and Conservatives have been notable. Regarding the Dutch case, see Visser and Hemerijck (1997).

Spain, on its part, has a fairly reasonable record of solving conflict over the past thirty years, with its pros and cons. On one hand, liberal democracy allowed for a complex and delicate political transition. It made it possible to deal with the economic crisis of the 1970s, a solution which, although not very effective (as demonstrated by the high unemployment rate in the 1980s and first half of the 1990s), mitigated the situation and made it bearable, and laid the foundation for later recovery (for example, regarding liberalization of the financial system). At that time, this led to growth rates that were comparatively quite high in the mid-1990s; in fact, the country's working population went from roughly 11 million employees between 1976 and 1995, to nearly 19 million in 2007. This has left the country with a sense of optimism, and has substantially improved its self-esteem, somewhat touched by the memory of the political fiasco of the 1930s, which culminated in the Civil War and a long period (forty years) of the Franco dictatorship.

On the other hand, numerous important issues have been left somewhat adrift.⁵⁷ Something of the sort has happened with the issue of territorial unity. The country has lived with this issue only partially resolved in constitutional texts, which the passage of time has only made worse. Now, thirty years later, it seriously threatens the continuity of the political community. Again, I repeat my caveat on fleeting moments (see above). Only the future will tell who the realists are: those who see the glass as half empty ("there's not really any problem here") or those who see the glass as half full ("the problems are huge"). For now, we must state that there is an important risk of political fragmentation; and I now want to focus on the logic of the causal sequence that has led to this existential risk, and try to measure it.

This matter is not only relevant to Spain. It is also important to Europe. If the situation were to end up breaking down, we would find ourselves with a European country splitting up after five hundred years of political unity. So far, this has only happened in the case of Czechoslovakia, which existed for less than a century, although it is true that the possibility is debated in Belgium, with just under two centuries of history as a nation-state, and the union of Scotland and England, which has lasted three centuries. Perhaps, in combination with the others, this case is an experiment in territorial disintegration and reconfiguration that paves the way for a different type of Europe. Perhaps a Europe of regions converted in nations, which would be a poor imitation of the 50 states of the union of the United States, with the condition that each of them would speak their own language (and, perhaps, English), and with the large countries conveniently split into three or four (or more) pieces, for the sake of equality. Or perhaps a Europe designed according to a variant of the Ottoman Empire, with central power and a network of inter-state relationships, plus an archipelago of *millets*, or self-regulating communities that would be responsible for numerous social and administrative functions not covered by the super-state in question, regarding the regulation of family, marriage, healthcare, education, internal safety and justice. There would be considerable internal mobility, but not so much between them, which would prevent conflict and reinforce the stability of the whole. And there would always be an important margin for the

⁵⁷ For example, they have lived with a deficient educational system (Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez: 2001, 2002 and 2003).

most skilled to reach the top levels of the pan-European elite, and its corresponding apparatus of power.⁵⁸ It is difficult to imagine that such a political system would have a robust foreign policy in the long term; but it is also to be hoped that it wouldn't need one because the planet as a whole would be configured so harmoniously and peacefully that foreign policy wouldn't be necessary.

It would also be interesting to see if the Spanish example, or counterexample, spreads in terms of procedures and methods. The procedure is complex, made up of three quite different processes: one which ostensibly takes place in the light of day, through public debate and partisan competition; another, in the shadows, through intricate judicial-constitutional procedures, which those in the know follow closely and the public hardly notices; and the third, through terrorist violence brewing in the dark. The emotional manner is contradictory because it combines two opposing moods, that of tension and that of laziness, alternating in society between phases of lucidity and indifference or somnambulism.

THE LOGIC OF THE POLITICAL CLASSES' HEGEMONIC PROJECTS

The key to what is happening lies in the confluence of two hegemonic projects: the hegemonic project on a regional scale, which is very old, of peripheral nationalisms (hereto forth, PN), and the hegemonic project on a national scale, which is more recent, of the Socialists. It is this combination that explains the current situation.

The PNs encompass both nationalist parties and the sovereignist tendencies of other parties (like those of the socialists or communists), focused on establishing full political autonomy and sovereignty in their region; sovereignty in the sense of reclaiming a sovereign act, that of the right to self-determination, from which it is yet to be seen if the people choose to form their own state or remain part of the Spanish State though a pact laying out the timings and conditions, including those for renewing the pact. A corollary of this strategy of the PNs is a political and cultural hegemonic project in each region. It is a matter of shaping the population's sentiments in order for them to wind up considering the language and culture, and even the region's *prodomo* historical narrative, supported by the PNs as their own, and Spanish language and culture as not their own, inappropriate and other. Thus the top priority of the PNs has been to control linguistic, educational and cultural policy in their autonomous communities.

The most important Spanish parties, the Socialist and Popular parties, have given in to this pretension. Two basic reasons have influenced this. First and foremost is political calculation. Both parties need the support of the PNs to

⁵⁸ Such a design could facilitate relative integration of Muslim communities in Europe, which would then have the chance to apply their own legislation, at least in aspects of life related to their faith. On the other hand, it would also be possible to see the experiment as a step in the direction of the reconstruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On this last option, but focusing more on its internal effects on the governability of Spain, see Sosa Wagner and Sosa Mayor (2007).

govern in cases where they only achieve a relative majority in the elections, which has been quite frequent.⁵⁹ The second reflects an attitude of general carelessness regarding cultural issues. The left and right wings share a common denominator of prioritizing issues of economic growth and social cohesion. They have been educated in the belief that Spanish voters are grateful for the merits of effective management and persuasive rhetoric regarding these issues. In practice, they have tended to give cultural issues intermittent and lesser importance.

The result of this has been that the cultural hegemony of the PNs has come up against hardly any resistance. In the Basque Country, it has been carried out by governments dominated by Basque nationalists; in Catalonia, through more complex political combinations and other procedures, but with similar consequences. In both cases, the discourse justifying this hegemonic strategy is interesting. The PNs have come to argue, *sotto voce*, that what was in play was a response to the previous historical injustice. Given that the Franco dictatorship had subjected Catalan and Basque societies to cultural and political violence, imposing the Spanish language while facilitating the relocation of streams of Spanish-speaking emigrants to these areas, the time had now come to turn the tables, at least up to a point. And it was their turn to force those immigrants and their children and children's children to undergo a profound linguistic, educational and cultural immersion in the local language, although surely without reaching the extreme of interfering with the use of their mother tongue in their social life. It is clear that the argument must be made with discretion, so as not to antagonize these immigrants to whose principles of freedom and civil, political and human rights they were trying to appeal. And, furthermore, discretion was doubly necessary because they had to make the argument while concealing its corollary, that by exercising this symbolic violence on the immigrants they were holding them responsible in some way for the injustices perpetuated under Franco.

Two generations (and four "classes") of left- and right-wing politicians have left them to do as they please. The symbols, historical narratives, and policies of language, education and communication: all of this has moved gradually towards the fragmentation of the political and cultural community, with still doubtful results, if we focus on the explicit declarations of "feeling Spanish" made by Catalans and Basques which still exist in very high proportions (and which are no less high among young people). But of course, the trend is clear, as is that of the PNs who insist on moving their pretension to control strictly political and cultural issues towards those of economy and society and, when possible, foreign policy.

However, so far, this trend hasn't been able to go too far because there was an implicit pact regulating competition between the Socialist and Popular parties, limiting the concessions either one of them could make to the PNs. This implicit pact was carried out through references, from both sides, to the constitutional

⁵⁹ Obviously the alternative would be a wide-reaching coalition between two large parties, like in Germany in times of crisis. Of course this requires not only common interests but also putting into practice the virtue of political civility (see above, chapter 5), which seems difficult to achieve in a climate of intense mutual mistrust.

text, whose reform procedures, moreover, required a qualified majority. This pact wasn't made at random. It was the result of a historical memory that is still very much present in the consciousness of the political class.

It was known that the key to the problem of rooting the Spanish liberal system in the 19th (and 20th) century lay, precisely, in the temptation of liberals and conservatives, or their equivalents (the right- and left-wing of the moment) to make deals with the extreme nationalists, Carlists or more or less radical Republicans, which called into question the liberal system. The solution, provisional and partial but with a core of reasonable intuition, was the pact between conservatives and liberals to favor the alternation of power between these two groups. This reduced the intensity of their rivalry and allowed them find common ground based on a constitutional consensus.

This history was reactivated by the history of the transition; however both have apparently been forgotten by the Socialists at the dawn of the 21st century. What we have now is a Socialist hegemonic project, set in motion by Rodríguez Zapatero's Socialist leadership, that includes a lasting agreement with the PNs based on reform of the constitutional text regarding the status of the autonomous communities with the aim of excluding the Popular Party from power permanently. The discourse justifying this change in strategy has been vague. There hasn't been a formal resolution from the leadership of the Socialist Party, nor an explicit and wide-reaching deliberation reflecting the arguments of a majority and minority in favor of or against this process. Nor have they been able to provide rotund arguments of social demand for reform, not even among the regional electorates; at least this hasn't been the case in Catalonia.⁶⁰ The historical motivations have only been referenced occasionally.⁶¹

An easier explanation for this change in strategy is the simple, old-fashioned, practical motivation of *libido dominandi*: they believed that in this way they could solve the problem of partisan competition once and for all, gaining power for a long time to come. The Party's acquiescence to a project that has hardly been debated, but whose practical efficiency can be discerned, can easily be explained in this way. We could also explore a mimetic hypothesis: for example, that the Socialists are imitating their own strategy and attempt at hegemony in the 1982-1993 period, or, rather, that they have imitated and ended up taking as their own the hegemonic strategy of the PNs, which has yielded such good results in their respective regions. However it is clear that the latter explanation reinforces the former, and in part blurs into it, given that what is being imitated is that which seems profitable to achieving power.

⁶⁰ As made clear by the high abstention rate among the Catalan electorate (51.15 percent) in the referendum on the Statute of Catalonia in 2007.

⁶¹ Despite the interest, past and present, in new, wide-reaching historical debate on the process of forming Spain's historical reality, perhaps emulating that which took place, for example, in the 1950s and 1960s, between Américo Castro (2001 [1948]) and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz (2003 [1957]).

ESTIMATING THE RISK OF FRAGMENTATION OF THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY

For one reason or another, the fact is that the Socialists have made a decision to support a hegemonic strategy, and that this decision has a specific consequence: it leads down a path that, quite probably, ends in the fragmentation of the political community and to two fragments becoming independent in relatively few years. For the moment, a referendum has already been announced for 2008, and another for 2010, in the Basque Country, which can be carried out under the guise of binding or non-binding referendums; and the Catalan nationalists have announced their intentions to embark on a similar process.

What is the probability that these steps will be taken? Let's say that the probability that the nationalist parties believe the time has come to attempt this over the, say ten, coming years and actually do so is 50/50; and the probability that, once they have started down this road, they will be successful is also 50/50, rounding up the weight of the independence movement in recent years, and counting on an important abstention rate induced by the corresponding social pressure. This would leave us with, let's say, a 25 percent chance of rupture and fragmentation.⁶²

There is a chance that this risk could be reduced as a result of an *in extremis* agreement between the two main parties, Socialist and Popular, but the probability of this happening has decreased, to some degree, precisely due to the procedure the Socialists have used to move their hegemonic strategy forward: a procedure that is curiously logical and inexorable. The Socialists believed that they could only move forward with their project by applying a tortuous procedure to pass the Statutes of Autonomy that implied substantial revisions of the constitutional text, avoiding the application of rules requiring a qualified majority in Parliament, which they didn't have. Once set to this task, they also had to conceal what they were doing. And to do so, it seemed logical and necessary to employ procedures to confuse public opinion. The easiest and least costly way to do this is to simplify the discussion, avoiding the argument, and posing a problem of trust between "them" and "us;" which, in turn, leads logically to the stigmatization of the adversary. In this case, the Socialists tend to present the Popular Party as the "extreme right;" which, in turn, logically calls into question the Popular electorate's civic-mindedness or intelligence because either this electorate knows what it is doing when voting for the (supposedly) extreme right, implying a lack of civic-mindedness, or it doesn't, implying a lack of intelligence. All of this entails the creation of a climate of insults that easily becomes mutual and intensifies into an uncivil climate for which (of course) the adversary is held mainly responsible.

⁶² Take note that here I am speaking of nationalist parties and not peripheral nationalisms, which include both the nationalists and the sovereigntist tendencies of the Socialist Party (the Communist Party carries much less weight). I believe that, judging from the current trend, the probability that, left to their own devices, the nationalists would attempt this fragmentation is more than 50/50; but this is dying down because they consider the possibility of counting on the support of the sovereigntist tendencies of the Catalan Socialist Party (for example) relatively low (given that doing so would have negative consequences on support for the Socialist Party in other parts of Spain).

We are speaking of strategies, because none of this happens without deliberation, and it would be absurd to attribute it to naivety or inexperience, or to the effect of mere passion, of mysterious forces or of systems that act on their own accord. The idea that there aren't strategies in play doesn't fit with what we know about the Spanish Socialist leadership and cadre, who are highly competent professional politicians. Proof of this is that, to reach and hold on to power, with their ups and downs, for just under two decades, they haven't had to mutate again and again in up to three political formations, as the Spanish right and center-right have. And that they have been able to appeal to an ample section of the electorate, being socialists and pro-capitalists at the same time (and even claiming to adhere to Marxism and then emphatically denounce it in a period of just three or four years) without experiencing any type of identity crisis. All of this requires skill and flair, communicative dexterity and internal discipline.

Furthermore, their calculation seems reasonable when seen from the standpoint of instrumental reason and the *techné* or virtue of being professionals focused on doing their job well and holding on to power. They expect to win and have won (in March 2008) elections giving them four more years in power; and four years is, in the eyes of those who operate in the political arena, an eternity. At this time, the situation could develop favorably due to three interconnected reasons.

Firstly, they count on the fact that, in the end, the nationalists will prefer the safe bet of a hegemonic position in their region plus a key position ("holding the key") in governing Spain, to the uncertainties and chance of independence. It is better to rule without interference in your own backyard and have a decisive influence on that of your neighbor (which, by the way, is a bit bigger). Secondly, they believe that, in the meantime, the country will experience a state of fluid political structure. The idea of a fluid structure, made up of elastic components and materials, sounds interesting, post-modern, daring, carefree, even transgressive. And, in this case, they also believe that they are the best ones to administrate and manage this fluid political state: the professional politicians of the Socialist Party and not those (in their eyes) inflexible and slightly "square" people from a conservative party with their metaphysical obsession with the fact that what is, is and can't be anything but. The Socialists, on the other hand, know themselves well and know they are dialectal and pragmatic, used to things being and not being at the same time, to the unity of complementary opposites, to working with fuzzy concepts. And, thirdly, they wonder, isn't the country as a whole quite similar to us? Isn't a country with a doubtful consciousness, with dual and even triple identities (European, Spanish and regional or nationalistic), with a confusing historical memory in a constant state of reconstruction, already very similar to that fluid state of political life?

Furthermore, this reasoning can also undervalue the importance of passion, on both sides, as has frequently happened in the history of Spain. It also gives little importance to the idea that many nationalists are born out of the possibility of a political career in an independent state, without the burden of "the rest of the Spanish State," and, in particular, free from the burden of some of the communities in the south (governed by the Socialists continually from the start) with unemployment rates that have tended to double the Spanish average over

the past twenty years. The peripheral nationalist movements can imagine that the Basque Country and Catalonia would be like some countries in Eastern Europe, small but dynamic with enviable growth rates.⁶³ And in the era of the European Union, and of globalization, they think, what need is there for them to be forever linked to, and dragged down by, an inconvenient and loveless marriage to the rest of Spain? Among the elite of the PNs, some cosmopolitan and others parochial, there are quite a few that entertain these ideas; and living, as the Spanish elite tends to, in relatively closed circles, believe that the acquiescence of their fellow members is enough to make them right. Perhaps it does make them right, or perhaps it's a matter of collective somnambulism. Or perhaps, as usual, they forget, when they are all together, the feelings of a part of their own local population, let's say half or two-thirds.

In any case, the articulation of this debate is still in progress, full of silence and allusions, punctuated by *de rigueur* outbursts; but even so, it is quite possible. It can be made more rational, with clearer and more distinct ideas because imminence spurs ingenuity, in the words of the convict going to the gallows in the morning, who sees things more clearly than ever. The opposite could also happen, that panic spreads; or that people grow tired of increasing complexity and seeking economy of effort, causing them to stop thinking about it. In fact, stimulation and doubt generate insecurity, and insecurity creates the temptation to seek refuge in rashness and delegate decision-making in those we trust the most, or mistrust the least. It is yet to be seen.

TO SUM UP

I have quickly woven together some narratives in the second section of this chapter, and analyzed others in more detail, but only regarding specific issues, in the third. Focusing on the status of democratic states,⁶⁴ the United States is a robust democracy with deliberation problems I have quickly mentioned and linked to problems of foreign policy, given their ever-growing involvement in the global scene. Europe is an experiment in progress; if we take it to be a *sui generis* democracy in the gestational period, I call attention to its difficulties in making decisions that would face its existential problem and solve its representational problem. I have pointed out that its weakness can be connected to the weakness, in turn, of countries like Germany and France. I have touched lightly and indirectly on the German case, through a reference to some debates on theoretical focus, more than on public policies. I have pointed to a tendency towards indecision or partial decision-making. I have analyzed the French case more in depth. I have emphasized the determination of their will to act in the world, and the indecisiveness contained in that will. It is clear that they want to act, but not what they want to do. At least, they insist on looking at a wider

⁶³ Latvia, for example, a country with just under 3 million inhabitants and a yearly growth rate of 6.9 percent between 1995 and 2005.

⁶⁴ The cases of Russia and China remind us of the limits to the spread of democracy, from the standpoint of today's authoritarian oligarchies that believe themselves capable of solving, in their own way, the existential and representational problems of their respective societies.

horizon and not reducing their focus, all things considered, to internal partisan conflicts. This contrasts with the Spanish case, in which we observe a narrowing horizon and an intensification of internal conflicts, which carries with it an existential risk, moderate for now, of fragmentation.

For the purpose of the argument that follows, I will highlight two things. First, democratic states are now facing existential problems (which, in turn, imply representation problems) linked to the globalization process, and there are risks both in facing up to these problems and in avoiding them. Secondly, the best or worst way to solve these problems is linked to the nature of the political class and citizenry, and the relationship between the two. This is the topic I will focus on from here on out. In doing so, I will also change registers; leaving behind commentary on our current situation in terms of public debate to venture into a more general theoretical discussion.