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Essay

A Europe in the World? – Twenty Years After 1989

DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

I cannot claim to be European in any personal sense. I was born and raised and educated in India where I obtained my first few degrees. I did my doctoral studies in history in Australia where I also taught for ten years before moving to the United States where I have been since 1995. Yet I have something invested in Europe and in what the fall of the wall in 1989 symbolized, an investment both personal and impersonal, in that it is an investment I have as an interested student of globalization, in particular of the rise of China and India in the contemporary world.

Let me begin by speaking a little of my own personal “envy” – if I may put it so – of the historical luck of the Germans. I belong to a particular language-group, the Bengali-speakers of the world. We were divided – or divided ourselves – in 1947 when British India was made into the two new states of India and Pakistan. The majority of Bengalis are Muslims, and a substantial minority Hindus. I am a Hindu. On partition, most Muslim Bengalis chose to stay in what became then East Pakistan and, in 1971, Bangladesh. Hindu Bengalis, on the other hand, formed the majority in the province of West Bengal in India. The division cost us both in material terms and in terms of real losses in the realm of culture – loss of linguistic, musical, and religious diversity and overlaps. But the division has proved to be much deeper and more complete than in the case of Germany. The walls we erected in our own minds will not crumble so easily as the Berlin wall. Of course, unification in Germany has had its own complications. The little that I have read on the cultural politics of German unification has alerted me to continuing tensions as people from the former East get portrayed as ha-

ving been burdened by their “backward” past – their *Ostalgie* – while Germany, thanks to its western side, wants to forge ahead towards a European future. Still, as someone born to a partitioned land, I have always thought of 1989 as embodying a possibility for all divided peoples of the world: the hope of unification.

But my larger investment in 1989 can be connected back to what Professor Timothy Garton Ash said in his opening remarks to a German History Forum held in Berlin in April 2009. He expressed the hope that post-reunification Germany, instead of becoming a “normal” nation-state, would actually provide leadership for the development of a European foreign policy that was called forth, in Professor Ash’s judgment, by a world in which Europeans, or even the West generally, no longer called the shots. In looking for a more European rather than inward-looking Germany, Professor Ash indirectly recalled the dilemma that Thomas Mann famously voiced in 1945: Do we want a Germanized Europe or a European Germany? It is, of course, well known that a European Germany was looked upon by many in the Federal Republic as an effective anti-dote to the recently witnessed excesses of the ugly sides of nationalism.

Professor Ash was, of course, not simply repeating Mann; he had a very specific objective. Europe, suggested Ash, needed a unified foreign policy precisely because of developments that would have been difficult to foresee in the years when Mann spelt out the choice that he thought the post-war Republic faced. Professor Ash was clearly referring to the contemporary global roles of countries such as China and India (or Brazil and Russia, to stay with the acronym BRIC). It was in that context that he wanted Germany to act like a leader of the countries that make up Europe today. Indeed, Ash’s question and Mann’s choice may thus be posed thus for the Europe of our times: What

should Europe be in the twenty-first century – a super-state with a nation-state like function, a Europe with a unified foreign policy, or a partner in an emerging system of interactive global governance and regulation? Not just a Europe dealing effectively with the world but a Europe that actually is *in* that world.

What do I mean by Europe-in-the-world? Let me explain this as a student of imperial and colonial domination. There is no question that Europe and Europeans once dominated this planet. By the end of the nineteenth century, eighty per cent of the surface of the earth was under the rule of one European power or another. Since 1945, however, we have seen a retreat of the colonial great powers of Europe and the rise of super-powers like the United States and once the Soviet Union as well. China and India today aspire to similar super-power status. China has already achieved a lot more of it than India. A super-power that dominates us surely dominates us economically, militarily, and technologically. It also undoubtedly influences our imagination – the twentieth century, which became the American century, cannot be imagined, for example, without the global dominance of Hollywood or American television. Yet a distinction remains to be made between European colonial domination of others and the sheer economic, military, and cultural weight of a super-power. The distinction is this: when European powers became imperial-colonial “lords of the humankind” from the period of the Renaissance to that of the Enlightenment and into the nineteenth century, they also gave their victims the terms and categories of thought with which to critique and challenge European domination. Two such great “weapons of criticism” forged in the European workshop of the nineteenth century – but with their intellectual genealogies stretching further back into history – were Marxism and Liberalism, both wielded with great effect by many decolonizing

¹ Based on a talk given at a History Forum held at the German Historical Museum, Berlin in April 2009. The piece was first published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai), 7 November 2009.

nations and thinkers who criticized European domination. No dominant power is ever totally benign. Today, I ask my Indian or Chinese friends this question: "I understand, and even support, your desires to be super-powers. But when you come to dominate the world truly and effectively, what terms of criticism will you provide to your victims so that they can criticize your domination?" Surely, technology, economics, and the media alone cannot produce such terms.

In other words, European colonial domination was different from super-power domination in that it had a civilizational aspect – I do not refer to the *civilizing* aspect, I draw a distinction here, for the "civilizing mission" was often simply an excuse for domination. I reject ideas about civilizational hierarchies but do find the idea of civilization, a shared human civilization on the planet, an extremely important part of our heritage. It was through this aspect that European powers invited criticisms of themselves. Anti-colonial thinkers often recognized this debt to Europe. I could have drawn on Frantz Fanon, the great ant-colonial voice of the twentieth century, to make my point here. But let me stay with my Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore to explicate what I am saying.

Europeans brought the word "civilization" to India. As Tagore remarked in 1941, the last year of his life, the word "civilization" that had been translated into Bengali (and Hindi and many other Indian languages) as *sabhyata* actually had no equivalent in "our languages."² There is no doubt that people such as Tagore carried on through their lives a complex conversation with the West in which there was never a question of a complete rejection of European traditions that had played such a central role in their own making. In his 1941 essay on "Crisis in Civilization," Tagore – faced with the barbarism of the war – struck a despondent note on the question of European civilization: "I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today when I am

about to the quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether." Yet it was Europe's capacity to furnish itself with tools for self-criticism and, therefore, for self-improvement that impressed Tagore in the end. Of the Spanish-English relations, for example, he would say: "We have ... witnessed from this distance how actively the British statesmen acquiesced in the destruction of the Spanish Republic. On the other hand, we also noted with admiration how a band of valiant Englishmen laid down their lives for Spain."³ The general principle involved here was spelt out as a part of a lecture he gave in 1923 and then reproduced verbatim in a letter written to an Oxford-based academic in 1934: "We have seen Europe cruelly unscrupulous in its politics and commerce, widely spreading slavery over the face of the earth in various names and forms. And yet, in this very same Europe, protest is always alive against its own inequities."⁴

Decolonization, the rise of the US, Soviet Union, and now of China, India, or Brazil have, of course, called a halt to the Europe that was built on five hundred years of domination of other peoples. But the Europe that lives on is the Europe that has provided us with the critical political vocabulary with which inequality, oppression, injustice, and the violation of human rights can be criticized. The vocabulary is now everybody's. And in that sense, Europe is part of everybody's heritage.

From this perspective, then, Thomas Mann's or even Professor Ash's question becomes larger: how, indeed, would Europe, as it is newly constituted, play its part in the world to come?

First of all, the European Union is a great administrative model for many regions of the world, surely the one I come from – South Asia. There is an organization that exists to help the nations of South Asian to come together in cooperative endeavors – SAARC, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. But it is hardly anything like the Union in Europe. Yet, imagine, how much easier problems such as "Kashmir" would

have been if this region in effect were one common market with free movement of labor and capital.

Secondly, there need to be changes within Europe. We need a more inclusive Europe, not just with regard to outsiders but with regard to the population within the territory called Europe. The silent identification of Western Europe with "modernity" and the rest of Europe with "backwardness" will have to be combated. This is, of course, an old habit of thought. There is a long tradition, for instance, of Germans seeing the Slavs or Russians as Asiatic, meaning "backward." You only have to travel in Eastern Europe to know that there is this kind of European Orientalism at work within the continent, an Orientalism that Edward Said did not study, but one that acts more or less similarly to the phenomenon he made famous. A version of this, as many academics have pointed out, still exists in post-unification Germany as well.

An inclusive Europe, however, must mean something opposed to the idea of a Fortress Europe. I am not expressing a preference here for porous borders or the absence of immigration policies. That simply would be unpractical and irresponsible. What I have in mind is a fact and a recommendation that follows from this particular fact. The fact is that the world in the next thirty going to see more people (many of them in India and China), more failed states, and more political, economic and climate refugees and more migration and movement of peoples. The politics of cross-cultural understanding requires that we the middle and professional classes everywhere embody a degree of cultural plurality, so that distinctions between cultural borders are somewhat blurred and every nation acknowledges the diversity that constitutes it. This is what will promote new creativities in the arts and the sciences, and new imaginations of society. Without the "chattering classes" embracing a sense of cultural plurality, there cannot develop the reflexive attitude with which to renew our shared European legacy. The French thinker Etienne Balibar calls for a global recognition of the "post-colonial condition." Balibar thinks of the contemporary world as postcolonial in two senses: (a) we live in times that come after the period of decolonization of the world from European empires,

² Rabindranath Tagore, "sabhyatar shankat" ["The Crisis of Civilization"] in *Rabindrarachanabali* [The Collected Works of Rabindranath], Centenary Edition (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1961), vol. 13, p. 407. There is an English version of the essay: "Crisis in Civilization," in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Ed. Sisir Kumar Das, vol. 3 (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999).

³ Tagore, "Crisis," in *English Writings*, pp. 724-725.

⁴ The lines occur in a 1923 lecture entitled "The Way to Unity" and are repeated in a 1934 letter written in response to a letter from Professor Gilbert Murray, published together under the title "East and West" in *English Writings*, pp. 349, 462.

and (b) we live alongside peoples whose ancestors have suffered in some form or others European domination. “Fortress Europe” today for me does not necessarily mean a Europe that has its borders closed. Sheer demographics will force developed countries and regions to have an immigration policy. The debate is more about the impact of such immigration. Do we want immigrants to sim-

ply fit into “our” traditions and become “us” with different skin-colors? Or do we want them to be educated enough not only to internalize what we consider the best of our values but also to use their sense of historical difference to call them into question and thus help us renew them? It is the latter attitude that defines for me the opposite of the Fortress Europe mentality today.

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