

# Re-Inventing Europe: A Cosmopolitan Vision

**Ulrich Beck.** Professor of Sociology at the Ludwig-Maximilian Universität in Munich  
and Lecturer at the London School of Economics

Europe can become neither a state nor a nation – and it won't. Hence, it cannot be thought of in terms of the nation-state. In fact, advanced research on Europe has scarcely dared venture beyond the conventional basic pattern of nation-state thinking. The EU is considered in terms of territoriality, sovereignty, jurisdictions, and demarcation. Even at higher levels of complexity, when speaking of “governance” or a “multilevel system”, the legal and academic parlance of research on Europe remains biased toward organizational and regulatory systems designed to conceive of and cast the EU in the image of the nation-state.

Sociology's failure with regard to Europe is particularly conspicuous. The discipline developed its instruments in the waning nineteenth century from the analysis of national societies. Because those instruments are ill-suited to analyzing European society, the conclusion in sociology is that, obviously, there exists no European society at all worth mentioning. This opinion has many causes, but one in particular deserves criticism: the concept of society is the crystallization point of sociology's methodological nationalism. In sociological analysis, Europe must therefore be understood as a plural – as societies; it must be understood in additive or, at best, comparative terms. In other words, the society of Europe overlaps Europe's national societies. This methodological nationalism practised by

social science is becoming historically fallacious, because it filters out Europe's complex realities and space for interaction. In a nutshell, it is blind to Europe and blinds us to Europe.

A similar thought pattern stems from the statement that there is no European Demos, or populace. What populace is meant – that of the ancient Greek city-states, the Swiss cantons, or the nation-states? What about the present-day societies of our intertwined countries? Do the nation-states themselves still even have a homogeneous populace or citizenry?

The nation-state is everywhere as the tacit conceptual measuring stick that makes the realities of Europeanization appear deficient: no populace, no people, no state, no democracy, no public. In addition to disinterest and sheer lack of understanding for the debates of other member states, there is a steadily increasing number of transnational communication processes about common challenges, such as the recent responses to the war in Iraq, to the democratic revolt in Ukraine, and to European anti-Semitism. Instead of making stereotyped assertions that there is no European public, people should expand the concept of “public” beyond its fixation on the nation-state and open it up to a cosmopolitan understanding that realistically accommodates the dynamics from which the transboundary forms of the European public sphere are developing.

What is “European” in this sense are conational forms of identity, ways of life, means of production, and types of interaction that pass right through the walls of states. It is about forms and movements of ceaseless border-crossing. Horizontal Europeanization is giving rise to new shadow realities that are lived in the blind spots of the aliens’ registration office: multilingualism, multinational networks, binational marriages, multiple residences educational mobility, transnational careers, and linkages between science and the economy. Both science and economy are globalized and Europeanized at the same time and it will be not easy to distinguish between those two aspects. These spots are spreading and are being taken for granted by the upcoming generation. Contemplating these developments, I see five lines of thought.

The first is the issue of the dynamic of inequality affecting Europe as a whole: what impact does the dismantling of national borders in Europe have on the European dynamic of inequality? For one thing, the nation-based limits to people’s perceptions of social inequality begin to dissolve as Europeanization moves forward. In response to the question of what legitimizes social inequality, there are at least two possible answers: the merit principle and the nation-state principle. The first answer is a familiar, well-rehearsed one and has already been the subject of critique. It is a perfectly logical consequence of the national perspective and relates to domestic inequalities internal to the state. The second answer provides an explanation for the “legitimation” of global inequalities and makes it possible to identify the major blind spots and sources of error to which methodological nationalism exposes the sociology of inequality. Perceptions of inequality that are based on the national outlook are subject to a fundamental asymmetry, as far as both society and social science are concerned. The “legitimatory achievement” of the na-

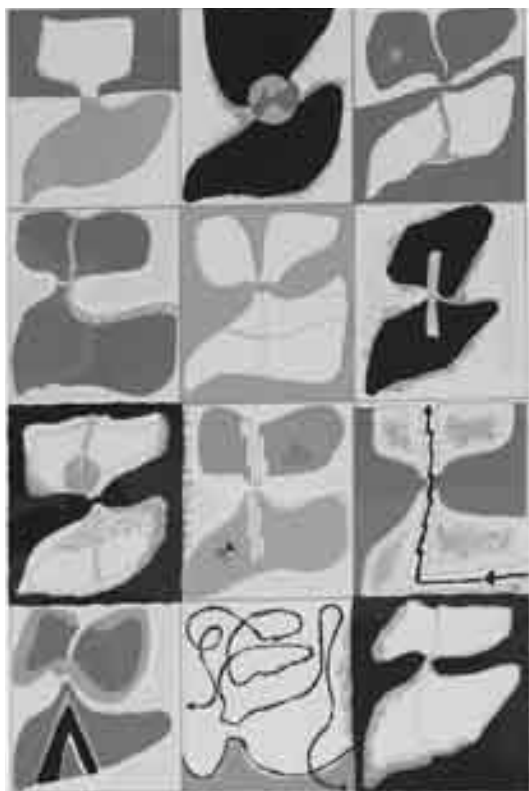
tion-state lies in turning attention inwards to the exclusion of all else, thereby banishing transnational and global inequalities from the field of vision.

The history of inequality presupposes the history of *equality*, that is, the institutionalization of norms of equality: without equality there can be no comparability and therefore no politically relevant inequality. The distinction between global and national inequalities is based on the fact that within different national arenas there are powerful norms of inequality at work – relating, for example, to civil, political and social rights, and pre-political national identities. It is these norms of inequality that establish both the comparability of inequalities within the national arena as well as the incomparability of inequalities between them.

*The EU is an arena where formal sovereignty can be exchanged for real power, national cultures nurtured and economic success improved*

This is the prerequisite for the political legitimization of socio-political activities within the nation-state and passivity towards others “outside” it. If inequality itself were the key political criterion, it would be extremely difficult to justify why prosperous European societies make such huge efforts to organize financial transfer systems within their own nation-states on the basis of national criteria of poverty and neediness, while a large proportion of the world’s population is threatened daily with starvation.

The methodological nationalism that underpins the sociology of inequality unreflexively makes nation-state bounded equality both a presupposition and a constant. This in turn obscures the fact that it is the nation-state principle itself that generates the increasingly scarce resource of *legitimation through incomparability* – scarce on account of the dramatic



Serigraph by Farid Belkhaia, "Andalusian Series",  
Éditions Marsam.

growth and growing consciousness of global inequalities. To put it another way, the nation-state principle *institutionalizes the act of looking the other way*.

What does this mean when applied to Europeanization? As the barriers of interstate incomparability between inequalities fall away (for example, through a growing European self-awareness or through the institutionalization of equality and self-observation), the European Union can be expected to enter a period of turbulence – even given constant relations of inequality.

The issue can be illustrated with the help of a simple example. The slogan "equal pay for equal work" was and still is a key demand of the workers' movement. However, the trade

union struggle for equality has come up against a "natural" boundary, namely that of the nation-state. As natural as it is within Germany to struggle to maintain national agreements on pay and conditions and to fight for wage parity between East and West Germany after German unification, for a long time it was just as natural to ignore wage differentials in comparison with other European countries. Looked at through national spectacles, differences in wage levels between Bavaria and East Berlin are considered illegitimate, while the same differences between Bavaria and Belgium are seen as legitimate. But what happens when these same differences are viewed and judged through European spectacles? Aren't differences in wage levels between European countries illegitimate in that context? Shouldn't European trade unions be demanding "equal pay for equal work" for every European worker? Or must this principle be discarded?

These are far from being merely academic questions, something that became abundantly clear in January 2004 when a great deal of heated polemical debate was conducted in different national public arenas over the move initiated by some members of the European parliament to strengthen the institution's identity by standardising members' parliamentary allowances. Huge inequalities exist here with regard to levels of payment for the same work. An Italian member of parliament receives 11,000 euros before tax, his German party colleague is paid about 7,000 euros, their Spanish neighbour has to make do with 3,000 euros, while their new colleagues from the Central European countries get no more than 1,000 euros. No immediate plans exist to reduce these extreme inequalities, as the EU foreign ministers succumbed to public pressure and quashed the initiative.

Neoliberalism has appropriated the old motto of the workers' movement in a new form: equal pay for equal work – as long as it is equal *low* pay! The unions seem to be faced with two

equally unacceptable options as a result of this. One is to resist this move and demand equal pay for equal work – as long as it is equal high pay! This was the route taken after German unification, although it is generally agreed to be economically fatal and politically utopian. The second option is no less appealing, where the unions find themselves in the perverse position of taking up the slogan of their enemies and demanding different wages for the *same* work – in other words: defending existing wage differentials between European countries. This forces the unions into a neo-national position.

The second is that Europeanization is initiating a historically new positive-sum game: Joint solutions serve the national interest. Europe's crisis is a mental one. National governments are struggling with seemingly national problems in a national setting and are trying to solve them by going their own national ways – and are failing. The export of jobs is an example, as is the attempt to control the taxation of corporate profits. Mobile business organizations operating within global networks are able to play individual states against each other and thereby weaken them. The more the national perspective predominates in the thinking and action of people and governments, the more these businesses succeed at expanding their own power. That is the paradox that must be understood. The national frame of reference violates national interests. The EU is an arena where formal sovereignty can be exchanged for real power, national cultures nurtured and economic success improved. The EU is better placed to solve national problems than nations could possibly do acting alone.<sup>1</sup>No matter where one looks in Europe, it is the same situation. The ratio of old people to the total population is rising to uncomfortable levels, pension systems no longer function, but the

necessary reforms are thwarted by the organized resistance of the groups affected. To escape this trap, the connection between the decline in population growth, the aging of societies, necessary reforms of social security systems, selective migration policy, the export of jobs, and the taxation of corporate profits could be defined and cooperatively worked on as a European problem. This approach can and would benefit all governments currently contenting themselves with sham solutions in the dead-end of the nation-state.

*Who is guilty and who is innocent, who will get ahead and who will fall behind the military or human rights, the logic of war or the logic of treaties?*

Looking at everything from the national perspective jeopardizes national prosperity and democratic freedom. Ensuring the health of the nation and the economy, effectively coping with unemployment, and promoting a lively democracy all require the cosmopolitan viewpoint. Transcending national and post-national sympathies, cosmopolitan Europe does not threaten the nation-state but rather prepares, facilitates, modernizes, changes, and opens it for the global age.

The third line of thought is that Europeanization requires a memory culture that spans borders. In the words Thomas Mann wrote in anguish about World War I: "Alas, Europe," by which he meant the calamity of the Western world. Two and a half thousand years shredded by war and bled to death. At the centre of every village in Europe stands a large monument engraved with the names of those killed in action – 1915, 1917. On the wall of a nearby church one then finds three more names from the same family on a stone tablet listing the

---

1. U. Beck, *Power in the Global Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005.



Ignacio Caballero.

casualties of World War II – killed in action, 1942; killed in action, 1944; missing in action, 1945. That was Europe.

How long has it been? Not very. Until the late 1980s the peoples of this belligerent Europe faced off in a nuclear stalemate. The policy of drawing East and West closer together seemed possible only through recognition of the seemingly eternal division of Europe. And today? A European miracle has taken place. Enemies have become neighbours! That wonder is historically unique, actually even inconceivable. At precisely the most wanton moment in the history of states, a political invention comes along that makes possible what is almost unimaginable – states themselves transform their

monopoly on power into a taboo on violence. The threat of violence as a political option, whether between member states or against supranational institutions, has been banished once and for all from the horizon of the possible in Europe.

That change became possible because Europe has experienced the advent of something qualitatively new – national horror about the murder of European Jews. The national wars and expulsions are no longer remembered only within a national compass; the national space for commemoration is bound to broaden to a European scope. A Europeanization of perspectives is occurring (at least the first signs of it).

Such cosmopolitanism in the opening of communication, in the acceptance of interdependence through inclusion of the stranger for the sake of common interests, and in the historical exchange of perspectives between perpetrators and victims in post-war Europe is something other than multiculturalism or post-modern non-commitment. Although this cosmopolitanism is intended to rest upon cohesive and reciprocally binding norms that can help prevent a slide into post-modern particularism, it is not simply universal. For an entity like Europe, interacting with the range of cultures, traditions, and interests in the weave of national societies is a matter of survival. As Hannah Arendt argued, only the infinitely difficult forgiveness granted and received through remembrance creates the necessary trust in the relationship between states and nations and empowers them.

The fourth line is the understanding of *European society as a regional world risk society*. The macrosociology of Europeanization is in danger of repeating the same mistakes made by methodological nationalism, only at the European level – of getting caught up in what might be called a “methodological Europeanism”. In order to counter this tendency, Europeanization should not be defined and analysed purely in endogenous terms, but in exogenous terms, in relation to the frame of reference constituted by world society. Let me make just a few brief comments on this point.

The experience of modernity is one of risk, in the sense that, along with its successes, modernity has also conjured up the possibility of its own self-destruction. However, this insight of reflexive modernisation needs to be opened up to the cosmopolitan point of view and thus to the question as to whether the threats posed by modernisation are perceived as the side-effects of one’s “own” decisions or of decisions made by “others”. The dynamic of inequality that characterises the world risk

society can thus be illuminated in terms of the distinction between self-induced threats and threats emanating from others. To put it in highly simplified terms, Europeanization refers to self-induced threats, while the ways in which modernity threatens to self-destruct in the Third World are perceived primarily as a threat emanating from others. Unlike the theory of dependency or the world system theory, the theory of reflexive modernisation highlights the fact that the different regions of the world are affected unequally not only by the consequences of failed processes of modernisation, but also by the consequences of *successful* processes of modernisation.

*Reality is becoming cosmopolitan. The Other whom borders can no longer keep out is everywhere*

The major strands of conflict during the Cold War were politically open-ended and acquired their explosive character on account of national and international security issues. By contrast, the geopolitical strands of conflict in the world risk society run between the different cultures of risk. In relation to risk perception, geopolitical conflicts are emerging between regions that bring highly divergent historical situations, experiences and expectations to the terrain of the world risk society. An outstanding example of this is the contrast between the degree of urgency accorded by Europe to the dangers of climate change on the one hand, and by the USA to international terrorism on the other. Not only are cultural perceptions of global threats diverging more and more between Europe and the United States but, because this is so, Europeans and North Americans are effectively living in different worlds. The way it looks to the Americans, Europeans are suffering from a form of hysteria in relation to the environment, while to many Europeans US Americans are paralysed by an over-exagger-



ated fear of terrorism. The danger is that as the transatlantic cultures of risk drift further apart, it will lead to a cultural break between the USA and Europe; to paraphrase Huntington, cultural differences in perception are generating a clash of risk cultures – either you believe in the existing climate disaster or else in the potential ubiquity of suicide terror attacks.

*The choice between risks is not only about choosing between risks, it is about choosing between two visions of the world*

Let's not deceive ourselves: the choice between risks is not only about choosing between risks, it is about choosing between two visions of the world. The issue is, who is guilty and who is innocent, who will get ahead and who will fall behind – the military or human rights, the logic of war or the logic of treaties?

The fifth, concluding line of thought is a question: how will a European empire of law and consensus become possible? In the final analysis, understanding the concept of cosmopolitanism in this way is also the key to understanding and shaping new forms of political authority that have emerged in Europe beyond the nation-state. But globalization, specifically the problems with the flows and crises of global finance, and the neglected European dimension of current socio-political exigencies show that the opposite is breaking over our heads for now. A nationally circumscribed labour market no longer exists. Even if we point the gun barrels at foreigners, well-educated Indians or Chinese can offer their services in Germany and the rest of Europe with a click of the mouse.

Reality is becoming cosmopolitan. The Other whom borders can no longer keep out is everywhere, but in a way that no cosmo-

politan philosopher had anticipated and that no one willed – surreptitiously, unintentionally, without political decision or design. The real process of becoming cosmopolitan in this world is taking place through the back door of secondary effects; it is undesired, unseen, and usually occurs by default. And what context of political rule is appropriate for it?

Edgar Grande and I have proposed for it a redefinition of the term “empire”.<sup>2</sup> Spoken in French, that word carries Napoleonic and colonial connotations and thus differs from the term when pronounced in English. The British Empire was something other than imperial America claims to be. The term “European Empire” attempts to place Europe on a par with the dissimilar US Empire. For all the similarities with the complex confederation or empire that emerged from the Middle Ages, the European empire of the early 21st century is built upon the existing nation-states. To that extent, the analogy with the Middle Ages does not hold. The cosmopolitan empire of Europe is notable for its open and cooperative character at home and abroad and therein clearly contrasts with the imperial predominance of the United States. Europe's undeniably real power is not decipherable in terms of nation-states. It lies instead in its character as a model of how Europe succeeded at transforming a belligerent past into a cooperative future, how the European miracle of enemies becoming neighbours could come about. It is this special form of soft world power that is developing a special radiance and attraction that is often as underestimated in the nation-state mould of thinking about Europe as it is in the projections of power claimed by American neoconservatives.

But what impact does that have on European integration? For a long time, that key

2. U. Beck and E. Grande, *Das kosmopolitische Europa*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004 (English edition: *Cosmopolitan Vision*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006).

concept consisted primarily of the abolition of national and local differences. This “harmonization policy” confounded unity with uniformity or assumed that uniformity is required for unity. In this sense uniformity became the supreme regulatory principle of modern Europe, transferring the principles of classical constitutional theory to institutions at the European level. The more successfully EU policy operated under this primacy of uniformity, the more resistance grew and the more clearly the counterproductive effects surfaced.

By contrast, cosmopolitan integration is based on a paradigm shift in which diversity is not the problem but rather the solution. Europe’s further integration must not be oriented to the traditional notions of uniformity inherent in a European “federal state”. Integration must instead take Europe’s irrevocable diversity as its starting point. That is the only way for Europeanization to link two demands that at first glance seem mutually exclusive: the call for the recognition of difference and the call for the integration of divergencies.

Understood as a historically tested political model for a post-imperial empire of consensus and law – “the European dream” (Jeremy Rifkin) of a soft world power – Europeanization is fascinating as an alternative to the American way, and not least to Americans critical of America. Ultimately, it is about something completely new in human history; namely, the forward-looking vision of a state structure firmly based on recognition of the culturally different Other.

So what is my cosmopolitan vision of Europe? We Europeans are, in Kant’s words, crooked

timber and pretty provincial. That aspect of us has endearing sides, too. Individual populations – the British and the French, for example – have the reputation of being cosmopolitan, but the attribution applies to them as French or British, less so as Europeans. Expansion can either cause the EU to roll up like a hedgehog or lead it to embrace cosmopolitanism and thus enhance the awareness of its responsibility in the world.

*Europe’s further integration must not be oriented to the traditional notions of uniformity inherent in a European “federal state”*

The national idea is unsuitable for unifying Europe. A large European superstate frightens people. I do not believe that Europe can issue from the ruins of the nation-states. If there is an idea capable of uniting Europeans today, it is that of a cosmopolitan Europe, because it stills Europeans’ fear of losing identity, makes a constitutional goal out of tolerant interaction among the many European nations, and opens new political spaces and options for action in a globalized world. The persistence of the nation is the condition of a cosmopolitan Europe; and, today, for reasons just given, the reverse is true too. The more secure and confirmed Europeans feel in their national dignity, the less they will shut themselves off in their nation-states and the more resolutely they will stand up for European values in the world and take up the cause of others as their own. I would like to live in this kind of cosmopolitan Europe, one in which people have roots and wings.