

Europe, an open drama and a space for friendship



Víctor Pérez-Díaz



FUNCAS Social and Economic Studies, 9

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Preliminary note

Europe and Spain are facing a very serious crisis that is, in some way, *compact*, given the intense connectivity, the inter-relationship, between their different components including healthcare, the economy, politics, society and culture. This complex, and critical, situation creates confused perceptions and feelings of mistrust and impotence. The élites try to conceal their confusion, as seems natural to them, with words and gestures of authority. But it is perhaps ordinary people who grasp the situation with greater realism when they confess to their bewilderment.

This book contains two short essays that complement one another.* The first consists of a description and analysis of the combination of factors that have emerged across Europe, and in Spain, and which have given rise to that perception of generalised crisis. By presenting the crisis as *an open drama* with various plausible outcomes, the possibility remains of finding ways of overcoming it. I use a literary metaphor (a short story by Edgar Allan Poe called "A Descent into the Maelström") to illustrate one way of understanding the crisis as if it were a whirlpool that causes a process with three sequences: first, the descent into the abyss and then, a leap and the ascent from the abyss. I focus attention on a combination of two strategies: one of reasonable argument and the other, of civic compromise (with an important community component) on the part of the members of civil society. It is on the success of these that the viability (and continuity over time) of the political community depends, and also the solution to the current crises.

The second essay deals with the problem of the production and reproduction of the political community in the understanding that this is only possible if it is configured as a *space for friendship* to a sufficient degree. This requires handling the internal differences of the community in question with caution and, in particular, "civilising" the *feelings of mutual rejection* to which those differences can, and frequently do, give rise. In this case, and merely by way of illustration of what could be an argument applicable to other cases, I examine the problem of the relationship between Spain and Catalonia at the present time: a problem that could lead to either a series of learning processes or to a cascade of errors within Europe as a whole.

As regards my method. In the first essay I use a literary metaphor whereas, in the second one, I flesh out my argument by referring to my own personal

* This essay has been produced within the framework of the series of Studies on Europe sponsored by Funcas. Translated from the Spanish original by Patricia Newey.

testimony. In both essays, I follow the rule of combining (very) varied materials to validate a plausible argument, mindful of the interpretations of the agents and of an explanation of the processes; and it is an argument which, at the same time, incorporates the perspective of the observer. In this way, we can place ourselves in the context of the broadest possible conversation, in the classical tradition of the human sciences.

These works have been written within the framework of a series of studies on Europe sponsored by Funcas, the first results of which can be seen in *Tres ensayos sobre Europa / Three essays about Europe* (Pérez-Díaz, 2020). In that text, I concentrated on three themes related to the ongoing formation of Europe: the importance of the *sense of limits* in political life; the crucial (and ambiguous) function of *memory* in the formation of collective identities, and the complexity, variety and indeterminacy of the *strategic games* involved in a process like that of the construction of Europe.

Introduction: A Proustian project for Europe, or exploring a possible future

We can explore the future of Europe the way we could explore a forest together by talking and trying to help each other find our way. I even think that perhaps we can make Europe through conversations not unlike this one. I anticipate the steps, the themes, of this introduction: (1) an open drama, (2) the goal of a European space of friendship, (3) an approach to the problem of mutual understanding that I will call "Proustian", (4) a narrative of complex identities, and (5) the questioning of a binary interpretive framework.

1. A crisis, a drama, an undetermined outcome

Let us start with some of the commonplaces that many Europeans share today. We find ourselves in dramatic circumstances, subject to the combination of a pandemic with an economic crisis, political disarray, a disquieting geopolitics (with the re-emergence of very powerful authoritarian states), a quite fragmented society and, let us say, cultural confusion. These are challenges to be met by the European Union and the European nation-states, both of which seem to have a rather limited capacity to do so successfully.

From which it can be inferred that there is a middle to high risk that Europe will drift (possibly gradually) towards increasing entropy. Perhaps in a mood of alarm, or perhaps in that of a kind of *inertiae dulcedo*. going down en douceur (like republican Rome, in the vision of Tacitus in his *Agricola* (1946 [c. 98]: 3), allowing such descent to happen.

However, we can also argue that the next scenes in that drama are yet to be written, and that the outcome is not predetermined. There is still time and space to jump over the abyss, out of the maelstrom, in Poe's account, for a Pascalian wage of some kind, trying to make things better. In other words, our critical situation can be seen as an opportunity to move forward.

Provided we understand it. We understand it by learning, listening to each other, being part of a broad conversation. The need to understand increases the importance of learning through the process of reasoning together and engaging in a civic debate that leads to the right decision and the right action at the right time.

A debate between all. Of course (1) including the main decision-makers, used as we are all to them playing their role in the center stage of the public

space. But also, and perhaps above all, (2) incorporating ordinary people, many of them accustomed to applying a common sense approach to specific practical questions of politics and public policies, to doing so on a daily basis and in the real life. People without whose support there is no room for a sustained public policy in the long term, nor for the political community to even survive for long. As well as (3) with the contribution of the kind of benevolent enlightened people to whose wise charity Leibniz referred (Riley, 1996: 140), about three centuries ago, as a crucial factor in helping Europe emerge from a long and disastrous cycle of European uncivil wars (mainly political and religious). Enlightened people that we could take as role models for academics, professionals and other variants of *spectateurs engagés*.

2. Europe as a space for conversation and friendship

The very experience of talking already suggests the way to build and shape Europe as a space for conversation and, ultimately, for friendship. It provides Europe with resources for its construction, crucial in the long and short term: reinforcing its identity and its strategic capacity, to begin with for finding its way; but also, learning to proceed step by step—strictly speaking, the very first step of a genuine conversation bears witness to being already, in some way, closer to the destination.

The key to moving down this path lies not so much in combining ingenious design with the willpower to apply it, as in combining a sensitive memory exercise with a sufficient degree of empathy. To create this space of friendship, the main thing is not to define a project, a design, and make a strong show of willpower—through a very elaborate constitutional text, a number of political commissions, a major information and propaganda campaign, and an appeal to the popular vote and to demonstrations in the streets. Making Europe does not require a voluntarist or decisionist project under the banner of “more Europe”, nor a postmodern and nominalist strategy based on the assumption that Europe is or will be whatever we decide it to be.

What is needed is, rather, to be “realistic enough”. To begin with, have a sort of common-sense of reality, which allows us to learn to manage Europe as *it already is*, as the always provisional result, but capable of resisting and lasting, resilient if you like, of an experience of successive choices between different possibilities—by the way, almost always choices between a second best and a lesser evil. These choices are made, remade, remembered, and interpreted over and over again. In other words, the way to get closer to the goal is to do what we can to manage the present while reinterpreting the past—in a way reminiscent of that suggested by Otto Neurath to articulate a theory: “like sailors who have

to rebuild their ship in the open sea” (and “without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock and reconstruct it from the best components”) (Cartwright *et al.*, 1996: 89).

Reinterpreting the past means dealing with a contested experience of centuries, full of ambiguity and made of contradictory elements: memories and forgetfulness, mutual care and selfishness. It involves listening to each other as we tell each other the long and dramatic story of a past of encounters and misunderstandings, of cooperation and ongoing rivalry, often of a mimetic character. Thus, learning to recognize our cognitive, moral, and emotional limits, and to live with them while we try, perhaps, to overcome them—so that we can learn from our mistakes (or sins, or deeds that deserve repentance...), while, on the other hand, we are encouraged by our achievements. And in this way, in the end, growing?

3. Building a moral character, with a Proustian imprint

The point is, we can interpret that growth in very different ways. We can take for granted some unanimity on basic improvements such as those relating to nutrition, hygiene, life expectancy. But other more controversial issues remain. For example, we can understand growth and progress in terms of accumulation of wealth and power and glory and technical knowledge, or in terms of the building of character of the people in question.¹

When it comes to specifying the type of moral character that serves as a criterion for that growth, we can, and usually do, find a guide for it in, and choose loosely between, the proposals of our ancestors and our speculations of the moment. And in that moment, we make a decision and take a stand: for instance, a stand not to confuse magnanimity with the ambition to reach the top of the world no matter how. Perhaps choosing a Pascalian wager instead of a Faustian bargain? A Pascalian bet ... or a Proustian one?

We can consider learning and understanding and growing in a Proustian way in the light of a definition of Proust’s character as that of a continuous reflection and oscillation between the past and the present that favors the development of intelligence and care for others, intense curiosity and empathy, lucidity and rejection of indifference understood as the summum of cruelty towards others. The world would be perceived as composed of significant others, to begin with the closest ones and continuing with those of more remote times and

¹ And leaving aside that such people, being subjected to a life cycle, may or may not ask questions and feed, or not, hopes about a certain form of personal or collective permanence (of nations, for example).

places; with the expectation that maybe (some? many?) of these people listen to each other with a sufficient dose of curiosity and empathy. Applying the “principle of charity”, in the terms of Donald Davidson (2006): that is, trying to understand what others mean by what they say – instead of letting oneself go down the paths of war at the first opportunity, in an endless game of win or lose.

The choice we make depends, to a large extent, on how we define “the good things in life”.² On the one hand, as things are usually seen today, these good things in life refer to the aforementioned power and wealth, glory and (say, pretensions of magical and/or technical) omniscience. On the other hand, it is possible that such “good things” are called into question as “the ways and vanities of the world”, as they have been and are, over and over again, in various moral languages, since axial times.

In any case, we must introduce a caution here. Because understanding reality as it is (and not merely as it ought to be) requires a sense of reality that recognizes the important display of the unfolding of the passions of hubris and rapacity, of vanity and mania to indoctrinate others which constitute a very important part of our historical experience so far – and demonstrate that the virtue or moral goodness achievable by humans has its limits. A caution that the European moralists of the seventeenth century knew all too well; and that our experience of the last three centuries, after the Enlightenment, has only confirmed.

4. A narrative of complex identities

The next task at hand is understanding the complex identity of all of us. Because we still have to reckon with another “fact of reality”: the pervasive experience of people living with multiple identities. And the fact that they do so by giving priority to one or the other according to circumstances, which gives rise to a quasi-continuous internal dialogue of those who feel they are members of different groups at the same time. The fact is that humanity has a long experience of handling itself in this way.

In the case of Europeans, who are also members of a nation-state, survey data tells us that about two-thirds of them (and up to four-fifths in several countries) feel that they are both members of their nations and Europeans, and so it has been for decades. Today people live this double experience as if it

² Other questions can be raised about the larger issue, already mentioned, of basic goods; and whether they are limited goods, or not.

were part of the natural order of things: nothing to feel uneasy, strange about. And this applies (1) to ordinary people, whose local experience often exceeds, by far, the one they may share with the rest of Europe, as well as to (2) elites of all kinds: politicians, usually obsessed with control of local politics; business people, eager to cultivate their ties with local authorities and local markets; the publishers and media, writers and academics, attentive to their cultural and linguistic communities, and so on.

Strictly speaking, the fact of this identity duality being lived as part of a natural order of things reflects a complex and very prolonged historical experience: a pre-modern, modern and contemporary experience. To put it as simply and briefly as possible, this experience encompasses (1) the long period of a kind of coexistence between empires and regional authorities, in the distant past, (2) the times of modern or quasi-modern states, involved in a game of countless conflicts and unstable mutual accommodations, and finally, in the last century, (3) an all too terrible series of experiences with intense conflicts that evoked the possibility of an atrocious mutual destruction, at least twice; followed by (4) seventy years or so of “peace and prosperity” in Western Europe and some thirty years of something similar in Eastern Europe. Precisely this relatively recent contrast of war and peace has generated the experience of a prolonged *modus vivendi* and an apparent normalcy, and led to the expectation of an endless maintenance of the current status quo. As a result, most Europeans have become accustomed to living their dual identity in a natural and harmonious way, engaged in a kind of peaceful inner dialogue regarding that duality.

But we should remember that the *modus vivendi* of the moment finds its roots in the legacy of a mixture of symbolisms and experiences of much more depth, deployed in the *longue durée* – as suggested by the example of nations or cities “on the hill”, eager to reach a position of prominence.

So, the recent experience of a peaceful, united or quasi-united Europe is given within the framework of a narrative that unfolds the symbolisms of country, nation, *Heimat*, *patrie*, homeland, implying that the nation is unthinkable outside the context of Europe, not just here and now, but over time. Unthinkable it is, not only to see it outside the context of Europe, but to try to see it as not being a very special part of it. Unthinkable, to see it outside a system of European nations as entities loosely connected to each other, or confederations, or empires, etc., being the European Union but another avatar in a series of mutations of that system. Therefore, the nation would transcend the rather narrow experience of modern and contemporary times, which tends to exaggerate the differentiated character of each nation—while, in fact, even the crucial moments of “putting the nation first” may attempt to obscure, but they cannot eliminate, the fundamental fact that just being the first of many others makes us dependent on the others’ recognition.

Let us take the case of France, for example, as a historical reality that embodies a very rich and complex symbolism. Which connects its current commitment to an open society and its universalist values, with a very specific identity and with the feeling of having a national mission, rooted in a history that links the symbolisms of a Holy Land and the France of Sainte Jeanne d'Arc (Kantorowicz, 2004 [1949]), going through the experiences of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, not to mention the symbolisms of *le Roi Soleil* and Bonaparte, with their armies supporting and embodying their dreams of greatness, and of being the centre of the world. Willing to lead Europe at any time, without ever reducing her desire for protagonism.

Of course, France has not been and is not alone in this endeavour. Many European nations have seen themselves as bearers of extraordinary, providential projects, especially favoured by some divinity. Hence, their national and patriotic self-assertion usually has a deep religious or crypto-religious dimension, and this for reasons that seemed plausible and even profound to many reasonable people at the time. Spain, England, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark..., Italy/Rome and Greece. All of them, at some point, expansionists by land and sea and with the help of God; and defenders of the legacy of their ancestors and their true faith; a wall of containment against "godless invaders" who challenged their very existence and the essence of... the whole Europe.

5. Questioning the binary interpretive framework of Europeanists and nationalists

A binary interpretive framework that rigidly opposes Europeanists and nationalists works against the creation of the space of friendship and of understanding the complexity of feelings of identity and belonging to which I have referred. Such framework tends to distort the symbolisms and experiences through which people try to make sense of their double identity, questioning both the European component of that identity and its national component, impossible to understand disconnected from Europe.

On top of that, such binarism calls into question the culture of conversation and adds confusion to the European debate on all kinds of issues, and therefore reduces the strategic capacity of both Europe and its constituent nations to check the risk of drifting towards the sort of chaos I referred to at the beginning of this exposé. A drift towards variants of (1) a capitalism or a market economy operating by remote control and unintelligible to ordinary people, which seems to lead us towards an increasingly pronounced precariousness and inequality, and the marginalisation of the majority; (2) a democracy that leads to partitocracy

and to the game of oligarchies and populism, and to a politics of division and exclusion; (3) a society reduced to an aggregate of identity groups and self-centred interest groups; and (4) a cultural environment that is becoming a kind of Tower of Babel, in which each one tries to impose his own version of what seems to him politically or morally correct.

In sum, Europe is today, as it has happened so many times before, at a crossroads. Whether Europe chooses one or the other road depends, to a large extent, on her ability to remember and become aware of her limits, but also on the awareness of her potential to listen and thus foster a space of friendship both within Europe and with the rest of the world. Avoiding the worst of the current binarism of Europeanists versus nationalists (and globalists versus localists). Learning from the mistakes of the past to better manage our complex identities, contradictory narratives, and changing socioeconomic circumstances. Trying not to be the centre of the world, but just helping the world to stay alive, being one of its shepherds and its witnesses. Reasoning and caring... as long as it takes; as long as it is necessary and as it is possible.

Chapter 1

Europe, a maelström and a leap of faith: In a crisis of growing complexity, how to descend into the abyss and re-ascend

The aim of this essay is to explore some aspects of the contrast between the current (massive) crisis in Europe and in Spain, and the (limited) strategic capacity of their political communities to deal with it. I approach the issue from a sociocultural perspective that emphasises the nature of the crisis as one of open drama, and the feeling within these communities of being overwhelmed by the gravity and urgency of their problems, as well as some aspects of the sense and moral dimension of their response. I also highlight the role that could be played by the citizens who make up civil society –the ordinary people– in the handling of the crisis. I employ a literary figure, that of the Maelström, to illustrate my argument and I make general use of a variety of materials and references from the social sciences, narratives, art, history, moral philosophy, statistics, personal testimonies, newspaper articles, popular culture as well as some brief digressions for the purpose of enlarging the spatial and temporal, and intellectual, framework of the discussion.

This work forms part of a series of essays on Europe in which I have focused my attention on other sociocultural factors such as the sense of limits, the role of memory in reinforcing feelings of identity, the willingness to commit to a variety of strategic games, and caution when it comes to dealing with feelings of mutual distrust (Pérez-Díaz, 2020; chapter 2 in this book).

1. Europe, its capacity for agency and the resilience of its nation-states

The European construction as a narrative and as a lived experience

In view of the three-quarters of a century that has gone by since the end of the Second World War, it seems clear that moving forward with the construction of Europe while reducing its citizens to a secondary role (which comprises little more than being mobilised to participate in one referendum after another, accepting regulations, or receiving aid) reduces the capacity for agency of Europe as a political community. It threatens to convert the ironic comment of Eric Voegelin (in his intellectual autobiography; 1989: 107) about

the “famous Europe that never existed” into a kind of prophecy: “Europe as the undefined promise that never comes to be realised”. Its realisation would require a strengthening of purpose, widespread cooperation and a change of direction.

Numerous cultural and institutional factors have influenced and continue to influence negatively this process of European construction with reduced civic participation. A long history of intra-European conflicts, exacerbated in the first half of the twentieth century, of partisan struggles, economic competition and colonial expansion led to increased emphasis on the nomocratic dimension of the European political system or, that is, on the legal system and the game rules, while focusing less on its participative dimension.

Moreover, the deficit of agency has been present from the outset. European nation-states embarked upon the adventure of a united Europe with a reduced capacity for agency, broken as they were from the recent war, and in need of external defence and support. They pursued their adventure in an ambivalent manner. They wanted a Europe (and a United States) that would protect them, while reserving for themselves a substantial part of their sovereignty. As a result, their political classes have since exercised their leadership by upholding this bi-polar approach, reflected in a series of performative contradictions whereby, on the one hand, they have promoted the European public space with Europeanist rhetoric whilst, on the other, they have fragmented it with actions aimed, above all, at the national interest (Pérez-Díaz, 1997).

Sadly, such rhetoric has consequences. If the symbolism diverges from the baseline reality, the latter is weakened. Therefore appealing to the European collective identity based on narratives of memories and projects is superficial when these are no more than mantras and theories, and when they do not succeed in becoming part of people’s experiences and living culture. The conversion can be difficult and laborious because the evocation of memories is, at times, painful and demands a considerable moral and emotional effort; and because it is not easy to articulate a common project for countries that are economically, socially and culturally so diverse without addressing the interconnections of their many interests and passions.

It may seem paradoxical but Europeanist rhetoric is even less persuasive when it occurs within a binary interpretative framework that dominates the public space such as that of Europeanists *versus* nationalists. The reason for this is that the contrast tends to cause confusion, firstly, because the opponents misrepresent their positions: in fact, not for a moment do the Europeanists lose sight of their national interest, and neither do the nationalists have the slightest interest in leaving Europe. Secondly, and more importantly, because

that binary framework constitutes a source of mystification since it conceals the basic agreement between Europeanists and nationalists about their common roots and the very significance of their confrontation. That significance is one of asserting different versions of a particular vision of politics: politics as the ground over which grand strategies are deployed in order to assert the will to power, and the domination of some over others (regions, parties, classes, ethnic or cultural communities, etc.); all of which challenges radically the very existence of a political community that encompasses us all.³

The aim of constructing Europe as a political community, a *demos*, with a strategic capacity, involves overcoming those obstacles by developing the cognitive, moral and emotional abilities of European politicians and citizens. This would reinforce in them the impulse for collective action and a realistic understanding of their situation, and also their choice of direction. (Impulse and a realistic sense of limits can be translated, in figurative language, into the impulse to fly and caution, not only to come in to land safely [Pérez-Díaz, 2020] but to guide the flight.)

An open drama, and a drift?

Over the last decade, Europe, in general, and a number of European countries like Spain, in particular, have been experiencing a particularly deep and complex crisis. This crisis does not form part of an inevitable tendency. It is a drama open to various possible outcomes according to how it is perceived and evaluated by the relevant agents, and what they do or fail to do as a result, depending on their actions and their attitudes.

Unfortunately, the mindset of many Europeans is that they feel bewildered and overwhelmed by the turn of events (the economic crisis, the pandemic), and the outlook has been getting worse. It is as if the performance in the public sphere had suddenly changed. What had been advertised as a scene from "The End of History", the definitive triumph of the Enlightenment and Modernity, which seemed to be swelling up to the crescendo of the finale of the Ninth Symphony and its "Ode to Joy" (the anthem of Europe), has yielded to a scene from the final act of "Swan Lake". With a very different *tempo*. Passing from the vigour of Beethoven to the melancholy of Tchaikovsky, the beloved one, who has metamorphosed into the white swan, vanishes. And with her, is it conceivable to imagine that the "myth of Europe" is also vanishing? As a committed and critical observer, Tony Judt (1996: 140) had already speculated was about to happen to the founding myth of Europe even earlier?

³ I explore this subject in my essay "Europa y el triunfo de la paz sobre la guerra" (Pérez-Díaz, 2021, in press).

What is quite clear is that, today, the climate of triumph has disappeared to be replaced by one that looks, to many, to be pushing us to the brink of survival. Perhaps we had become accustomed to dealing with the world of European politics, economics, society and culture as if the institutional systems and the stories that shaped them fitted together – or at least enough so that they would not break apart, but hold together sufficiently well to be able to move forward. But events have now taken a disquieting turn.

There is growing doubt as to whether this modern world of ours, Europe included, is not headed for a major drift: that of a distorted capitalism, a polarised and partitocratic democracy, a fragmented and atomised society and a confused and superficial culture. And most urgent is the question as to whether, if the situation deteriorates further, this aberration might not lead to domination by self-centred elites (and counter-élites) who would be playing the double game of mutual hostility and complicity among themselves. They would probably go astray within a maze of conflicts and compromises: always aiming to control a public space that is, on the face of it, erratic and full of distortions which, in turn, makes it impossible for them to be controlled by citizens, thus facilitating the development of the oligarchic and demagogic drift in modern politics.

Concerning Brexit

Even if we try not to over-dramatise the situation and maintain an attitude of reasonable doubt, (or “pragmatic optimism”), it cannot be denied that the current crisis has caught us by surprise at a time when Europe, as a collective agency, is still in the process of creation. It is not sufficiently advanced as to be able to spearhead a response to this crisis. It can certainly influence the course of events but not enough to suggest the existence of a long-term, coordinated grand strategy. It only exerts influence to a limited degree and as if from a distance; and it mainly indulges in reminding each nation-state that it should put its own house in order. Under current conditions, this reminder is certainly important but it highlights the fact that the nation-state continues to be the driving force behind solutions to the health, economic, social, political and cultural challenges exacerbated by the current crisis.

To some observers, Brexit offers an unparalleled opportunity to advance towards a more integrated Europe. They assume that the United Kingdom impeded realisation of the dream of a united Europe and that now, no longer encumbered by it, Europe will integrate sooner and better. However, this is a somewhat illusory supposition if we examine not only the centuries of wars out of which the Europe of today has been forged –largely because of them and

configured by them— but also the story of Europe in more recent decades. It is conceivable that the example of Brexit may, in fact, reinforce the tendency towards autonomy of the member countries. What is clear is that, at least until now, for the majority of Europeans, the Europeanist dream has only served as little more than entertainment for their leisure hours rather than as an aspiration to be made reality.

It is not, however, a dream that will become reality any time soon for several reasons, some of them mentioned above, and some more powerful than others. Some derive from the differences in political ideologies (narratives, gestures, discourses) between nationalists-above-all and Europeanists-above-all, although these differences should not be over-stated. This is because experience suggests that the populisms and nationalisms of left and right, the social democrats, the conservatives and the liberals all tend, in their own way, to be patriots, and also that they are obsessed with gaining power and holding on to it; which implies the permanence of the homeland that they wish to govern. This also applies to extremist parties: extreme but not to the extent that they will object to find a niche for themselves in whatever coalition government is in power. In fact, almost all of them adapt to “what is on offer”: a Europe at the centre of which is a semi-functioning European Union, and the hope that everything will continue to move ahead without forcing the pace.

In this context, neither does it seem likely that the European project will benefit from any kind of post-nationalist discourse on the part of left-wing or right-wing globalists in their various manifestations; nor that of the international environmentalists; nor that of those “fellow travellers” —China and Russia— who both support “socialist market” economies and authoritarian democracies, with their respective establishments in tight control of the politics, the economics and the media; and lastly, nor that of the futurists, fascinated by cutting-edge technology and innovation and transfixed by the expectation of a permanent revolution that will lead to continuous human and post-human transformation

In reality, a compelling reason in favour of the (*de facto*) primacy of the nation-state derives from the essential fact that, for many centuries (maybe fifteen, five, or only two), and still today, in spite of ongoing globalisation and European integration, the differences between European nation-states continue to be *lived* by the immense majority of their citizens (including the globalists, at least on a daily basis) as determining factors. As a result, even the Europeanists feel obliged to talk in terms of a Europe of partner nations, who are concerned for and help each other.

Citizens but not quite “sovereigns”

This language couched in national terms sounds all the more plausible when citizens feel that that is just what they are, “citizens”: but not so much citizens of the world and subjects of “human rights” as, above all, citizens of “their” country. It is “their” country because they feel that they are “sovereign over it”. They are the subjects not only of rights but also of duties and, in particular, with powers. They are not only citizens insofar as laws are applied to them but insofar as they have (or believe that they have) the power (and the responsibility) to make those laws. And their politicians are, or seem to be, approachable by, and responsible to, the public (Olsen, 2017): politicians whose names are recognisable and who seem to be relatively close at hand.

In contrast, insofar as they are European citizens, people barely understand the politicians and civil servants who hold power in the European Union and nor do they communicate with them; in fact, they do not usually even share the same language. What is lacking is a space for dialogue, because if citizens only half understand the problems of their own country, they understand those of Europe even less.

And this is especially true when the difficulties of communicating with European politicians are compounded by the difficulty with which European citizens have in communicating directly among themselves. As tourists, or as visitors for whatever reason, they exchange smiles and stock phrases of greeting and farewell, making use of the services provided, but they speak a different language and they use different gestures. They have trust in their fellow European citizens to some extent but it depends about what; and, faced by any misunderstanding, they are quick to sense or suspect others’ reticence. Their entire landscape, with sites of remembrance of famous battles (and their literature and their stock phrases) is replete with reminders that can and do rekindle their reservations.

Moreover, the politicians themselves make it difficult for their own citizens because they do not talk to them clearly (and sometimes not at all) about European issues. They obsessively focus public debate on local issues; and, over any little thing, they are quick to allege conflicts of interest, opinion or identity between people, to fan attitudes of distrust.

Strange to relate, when local politicians turn into European politicians, working on a continental scale, they are transformed. They are perceived to be far away. They are “off to Flanders”, as Spaniards used to say in the time of the Habsburgs. Nothing more is heard of them. They earn more money and acquire an air of importance. And in time, they fade from the popular imagination to

become virtually irrelevant. It even seems, at times, as if they themselves get bored reciting a European homily. Without wishing to, they encourage the indifference of their own citizens towards Europe except insofar as local interests are concerned. And this has occurred from the very beginning which, for Spain, was 35 years ago (when she joined the European Communities in 1986). All this suggests a climate of easy but superficial Europeanist consensus around the symbolism and reality of the European polis, that European political rituals seem to turn into a cult object for the initiated.

Against the background of such experiences, there has been a tendency for the citizens of each country to adopt an attitude that combines ignorance with indifference concerning the political problems of other European countries. Incidentally, this mutual indifference between countries is congruent with the general orientation of the cultural environment, more in accord with the principle of "each to their own" and, as for the common good, "we'll see". The common good would be "too complicated". They end up behaving as if there were some remote gods who should know what is going on but fail to make it clear and, when all is finally revealed, it is to find out that each country has "its own" common good and the rest can go it alone.

And now... reconstructing the constellation of nation-states?

So the United Kingdom has gone; but, apparently, it is not so that we shall now sing the "Ode to Joy" of Schiller and Beethoven "in unison" but so that each of us can do our own thing, even though we all share the same rhetoric of "there must be coordination". If we are set on achieving this coordination, rather than starting with all twenty-something nation-states, we could start with a simplified schema of five vectors: three subsets of relatively similar countries and two quasi-protagonists.

We have the new Hanseatic League made up of the Netherlands, Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, with its message of prudent governance and social and economic policies that seem akin to those of Germany. It does not, however, accord with what the Latin Mediterranean countries do, or seem to do, or seem to want to do. The former group tends to refer to the latter with a mixture of sympathy and indifference, tact and disdain, compassion and educational animus. These Latin Mediterranean countries are obviously very different to each other and, apart from their complaints being contagious, they tend to do little together. Each one of them (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece) has an amazing but remote history. For its part, the Visegrad group, made up of Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, seems to share certain common obsessions and a certain distance from everyone else, as the result of a singular

history and geopolitical location, having endured two totalitarian experiences and survived them while trying to remain true to themselves (Laignel-Lavastine, 2005).

Which brings us to the purported leaders of the EU, France and Germany, who are not fulfilling their roles. In reality, they have almost never shown much confidence in each other: are they really sure that they want to lead all the other countries, or just accompany them or guide them from behind like good shepherds towards... where? They still do not know themselves (even after some seventy years). They have enough to do organising the interminable rounds of conferences and declarations and admonitions; not to mention the rumblings (in France) of the “gilets jaunes”, the setting up and taking down of cordons sanitaires, and the expressions of pity for immigrants before they are relegated to the inevitable slums. Perhaps with a French “I want to lead but I can’t” and a German “I can lead but I don’t want to”.

Surveying the rest of the world, élites and ordinary citizens have little more than a rudimentary idea of how Europe can affirm either its autonomy by standing up to the United States or its co-leadership by working with them, when not even the USA knows what it wants. This has become apparent, not once or twice but *ad nauseam*, in the succession of crises and wars in the huge area that unites Europe, Asia and Africa between the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia over the last three or four decades: the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Palestine and Israel, etc. (not to mention other regions of the world); and under quite different American presidents (Clinton, the two Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump...). And in the case of Iran, the same game of chess is still being played over and over again just as it has been for over half a century, alternating carrots with sticks: a triumph of form over substance with poor results.

Now, with the pandemic, no longer “out there” on the horizon but “over here” on our doorstep, initial reactions to the situation suggest that Europe, although it is aware of the opportunity to take a joint lead in the task of health coordination and vital economic support, has still not overcome a profound inhibition and a deep-rooted timidity towards encouraging us Europeans to feel ourselves united and to act in concert when facing a crucial test in an extreme situation, the outcome of which is still unknown.

2. Spain, a dramatic trajectory – and a brief excursus

But if the nation-states are resilient they are also fragile. If we examine the case of Spain, the current situation would appear to reflect a mix of order and disorder at a time when the disorderliness is becoming more obvious and more

dangerous as a result of the pandemic. Faced with this, the initial reaction of the most influential spheres and a large part of society has been the defensive reflex of denying reality and clinging to routine: to the mantras of “it’ll go away” and “it’s not that bad”, bordering on a whimsical “maybe yes, maybe no”. This recourse to routine is barely concealed behind a mixture of improvised management and calculated language about grand strategies of “we’ll control the virus”, “we’ll defeat it” and so forth. We have gone from the magical solution of “the pandemic will go away by itself” (and from the inexplicable way in which it arrived) to “it will go away” by casting the right spell.

In addition, the rhetoric tries to hide the “minor detail” that this experience is going to leave us with in the aftermath: the feeling that, from now on, humanity (in other words, us) will have to live with the lasting possibility of another pandemic occurring, just like this one, suddenly and without warning. The ruling classes scarcely mention this possibility but ordinary people suspect it and discuss it in undertones. Indeed, a recent survey recorded the fact that 64.5 % of interviewees consider it to be very or quite probable that there will be another pandemic within the next ten years.⁴ It has caused tens of thousands of deaths (probably over 85,000 in Spain in barely a year); and its effects are combining with those of both a serious economic crisis with multiple ramifications and a socio-cultural crisis that we are still barely aware of, to create an extremely difficult situation.

It is useful to place this moment within the broader historical context. I do not propose to evaluate the Spanish experience over the last century, with its ostensible political history and its economic and socio-cultural intra-history. It is enough to remember that, after some dramatic events (the crisis of 1898, the *Semana Trágica* [the Tragic Week] of 1909, and the assassinations of Prime Ministers Cánovas and Canalejas in 1897 and 1912, Dato some time later...) that Spain avoided fighting in the First World War; but then grappled with the General Strike of 1917, the disaster of Annual, Morocco, in 1921 and the coup d’état by Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923. Following these came the setbacks of the Second Republic, culminating in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the subsequent Francoist authoritarian bureaucratic regime. This led ultimately to what we know as the democratic transition. It was a transition made possible by the fact that, beneath all that turmoil, the slow, complex and contradictory development of a civil society had been taking place, mainly in relation to markets and a plural associative fabric but with substantial progress in the rule of law which, in turn, allowed the political mutation towards a liberal democracy.⁵

⁴ *ASP Survey 20.064*. Online survey on a representative sample of the Spanish population aged between 18 and 75; fieldwork 19th-22nd November 2020; sample size: 1,254.

⁵ A full discussion of this question can be found in Pérez-Díaz (1993).

The transition has had its moments of light and darkness, with better phases alternating with worse ones in times of order and disorder. It has enabled life to go on in spite of deep social and political divisions: an economy enjoying almost continuous growth but clearly below its potential (with an unemployment rate repeatedly in two figures); a public space of uneven quality, somewhat noisy and tedious; and a society based on mutual tolerance, that has settled into a state of mediocrity and the discomfiture that comes from knowing that at some critical junctures it has been put to the test and failed (Pérez-Díaz, 1996).

Memories of the past have been a decisive cultural factor in making society very appreciative of the benefits of even its current predicament. These are far from inconsiderable if compared with the Civil War and the post-war period. They are not memories to be found in books or political or academic declarations but memories that yet live on; thus the current situation can be compared with its potential alternatives: an authoritarian or totalitarian country, or in the throes of becoming one, or an impoverished and backward country.

The fact is, in recent years, Spain has been engaged in preventing the break-up of the country as a result of Catalonia's demand for independence. If this separation were to take place, it is not difficult to imagine how it might affect other areas of Spain immediately afterwards. It has also been concerned with avoiding or minimising the risks of the roller-coaster of ups and downs in the world economy. Its political leaders have been diligent in adjusting to what they were being told to do on questions of basic economics by those whom we might colloquially call "their elders and betters" – the leaders of the major countries of Europe and international organisms. Letting themselves get carried away. Behaving "as if" they were, in fact, governing and leading the country towards...? Towards a relatively satisfied, fairly tolerant society with a margin of prosperity and –according to the optimists– ready to take top spots in the international rankings of health and education systems (at least until achieving "the best educated generation in Spain's history"); not to mention mass sun-and-beach tourism, and various services. In the meantime, they have been dismissing the opposite view as overly pessimistic.

It cannot be denied that the arguments of these (whom I call) pragmatic optimists are based on a very reasonable premise. In the last forty years there has been much good news. This includes a reduction in physical violence and other crimes, improved nutrition and a considerably higher life expectancy than half-a-century ago (the average in Spain has risen from 71.4 years in 1965-70 to 83 years today). Good news for the preservation of mankind, you might say, but not so good for its propagation because the birth rate has gone down dramatically. Likewise, there have been innumerable signs of the

endurance, flexibility and ingenuity of families and villages and associations working together and moving forward; a sense of freedom; examples of the vibrancy of basic emotions. There is probably also a greater intellectual capacity for the information processing required for producing objects, carrying out transactions, gaining access to social and economic services and using means of transport: the many and varied basic everyday activities.

However, the final assessment must depend on the moral criterion and the standard that we require.

A brief excursus on the cultural background of the crisis, and the culture of magnanimity

Our judgement on the (relative) drift or loss of direction of Spain will be more or less critical according to our moral standard and our value criterion of what we should consider to be the common good. There are many and diverse points of view in this respect. Such diversity may be an obstacle to analysis but need not be so. It may be an obstacle because it encourages confrontation that is confusing; on the other hand, it may encourage conversation which is enlightening. It is true to say that even wildly differing points of view can be drawn a little closer together as the result of experience combined with conversation, and sometimes in surprising ways.

Throughout Western history, we find not only myriad debates but also unusual and profound rapprochements which offer ways of engaging in a conversation (which go beyond the far too common schema today of “for or against the Enlightenment”). To take two extremes, let’s consider, for example, the visions of European society that can inspire a Nietzsche or a St. Francis of Assisi. To some extent, they both share a culture of great achievements. In Nietzsche, we find the will to power (to exercise over his neighbour), and in St. Francis, humble love (and care for, or service to, his neighbour). Nothing could be so apparently contradictory, especially if we take the version of Nietzsche himself in his *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche, 1979 [1888]) or in his *The Antichrist* (Nietzsche, 1968 [1888]). And yet, the contrast has its counterpoint. From a dynamic, historical perspective, that contrast may be subsumed within a debate in which affinities emerge between opposites: affinities which, in this case, relate to a certain standard.

Nietzsche, the militant atheist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Francis of Assisi, saint of the thirteenth century, have very different profiles but also some common features. These include, for example, explicit, or

implicit, praise of the virtue of magnanimity. This, in Nietzsche's case, is bound up with a Promethean feeling of a desire for power linked to an outwardly "more than human" objective (which could, in reality, be "simply human"). In St. Francis' case, it is tied to a profound, humble and loving feeling, a wish for holiness, *i.e.* on a different level of intensity of life experience and excellence. We should remember some of the small symbolic details that bring them together. They were both creators, with their vertical drive: that of Nietzsche as an "ascensional poet", in Bachelard's words (1943), and that of St. Francis, conversing with his Brother Sun; *both* of them living at odds with a culture of resentment. And the symbolism of the care of living creatures, recalling how Nietzsche went mad with distress in Turin, embracing a horse that had been flogged, and St. Francis walked through Gubbio in the company of a docile wolf.

It is true that, as they are portrayed in their respective legends, their basic attitudes are radically different, but one can infer a number of possibilities. Confrontation is one, of course, but also the affinity that I have just mentioned (those "small details" of the horse and the wolf), and that of a kind of transition between one referent and another. After all, it was precisely a moral sense of magnanimity that led Ignatius of Loyola to turn away from reading books of knight errantry and prepare himself for reading the lives of the saints. This set him on a different path, but one that was not radically dissimilar to chivalrous heroism. It was also the path chosen by our "national hero", Don Quixote – a path chosen by him not because he was mad but because he was a hero – who was ready to protect the weak, liberate serfs and adolescents tied to trees, and provide protection to widows and orphans.

In order to discuss standards (and criteria) as applied to the public arena, we can explore several scenarios that are fairly plausible given the historical conditions. The criterion that I propose (and the reader is welcome to back on their own proposal) is one of a society rooted in the principles of personal freedom and care for the human community (which is, by and large, Franciscan teaching). It is, likewise, a criterion that does not undervalue knowledge in the form of *techné* or craft, but is more concerned with a moral wisdom that aspires to the identification and realisation of those three (very) ancient "transcendentals" of truth, beauty and goodness, including the common good. In other words, it is for the good of a society that promotes debate among peoples who, while different and even cultivating their differences, are conscious of that common good.

Within our own historical cultural context, the discussion about the common good can be approached in a number of ways, including that of the tension between the Christian *Ecce Homo* and the Nietzschean *ecce homo*.

In very different historico-cultural frameworks, we can find analogous (though not, of course, identical) tensions. For example, within a society that incorporates a Confucian perspective, the tension can take the form of a distinction between two modalities of “public opinion”: a *minyí* opinion, mindful, above all, of reflecting and defending the interests (and identity) of certain groups, with some prevailing over others *versus* a *minxin* opinion understood as an “enlightened” public opinion aimed at reflecting the interests of everyone as a whole, *insofar* as “all under heaven” (Zhang, 2017).

3. The pandemic, key to the crisis and a sign of the times

From a geopolitical perspective, we are facing generalised disorder or, if you prefer, we are in the middle of a transition towards a new *modus vivendi* between world order and disorder (Kissinger, 2014; Nye, 2015). This includes the long-drawn out decline of the United States, the great power *par excellence*; a decline that set in long ago (if we count the fiasco of Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s, not to mention Korea in the 50s) and has continued in recent decades under subsequent leaders, with Trump being only the most recent. It is taking place against a backdrop of a long period when the country was losing its way, and when the American establishment has largely ceded centre stage to a “rest of the world”. This is comprised of a few actors anxious to play a major role, and many others around them anxious for their “fifteen minutes of fame” in the photo shoots at summits of world leaders, the latter carefully placed among their almost-equals, the twenty or thirty current regional leaders. Among them is an indecisive Europe and an uncertain Spain, with a world in transition towards who knows where... and now we have a plague, the coronavirus, sudden and overwhelming: a kind of existential threat that affects not only our health but our culture, economics, politics and society.

A public health challenge

It is said that international bodies tend to be very concerned with issues such as smoking, obesity and global warming: issues that are treated with due regard to the most influential sectors of public opinion and the economic agents involved in such matters – but who, in the case of the pandemic, have taken things much too calmly. Voices of alarm were already being raised as far back as 2015, but only at the end of 2019, and in January, 2020, were governments warned and, even then, with restraint. (Not until the beginning of March did the tone change.) We can assume that, in spite of the alarm, experts continued to discuss things quietly among themselves while health systems were on automatic pilot and political leaders were lagging behind, with an eye on other

things (like winning elections, losing elections, and blaming their adversaries). And although there was growing disquiet, scant intelligent attention was being paid to the issue by society.

Focusing on the case of Spain: it seems to be in an extreme situation within the global context, and within Europe Spain is to be found among those countries which have had the highest number of deaths and infections in the world per 100,000 inhabitants.⁶

The pandemic has stretched to breaking point a health system which, considering how it has functioned throughout 2020, has tried its very best to respond without anyone –health workers, citizens or politicians– knowing very well how to do so. This is because, so far, no-one understands what the illness is (mystery), nor do they know how it began (rumours) nor whether to blame it on natural causes or, more disturbingly, on human error or malice (anxiety). Such is the level of mistrust of the usual information sources that many resign themselves to perhaps never knowing. Above all, they suspect that it may happen again at any time.

Moreover, throughout this whole time the health system has been, and continues to be, only semi-coordinated. From the beginning, there was a lack of masks and other protective equipment for health workers. There were too few hospital beds, or reliable statistics. The lockdowns and track and trace systems were mishandled. It has become increasingly clear that there was an inability to coordinate the public system by national, regional or local government, let alone the combination of the public and private systems. That lack of coordination included management of the relationships with private hospitals, care homes, chemists, health centres and hotels (which could perhaps have served as what have been called “Noah’s arks”, providing quarantine centres for those diagnosed with the virus).

In Spain, the pandemic has exposed the shortcomings of politicians and civil servants who have not known either how to forecast or to manage. It has also exposed the media, who have failed to provide information and have usually confined themselves to announcing only semi-intelligible trends and churning out isolated but “shocking” facts for public consumption – apart from joining in the chorus of lamentations that no-one could have seen something like this pandemic coming: not the what, nor the how, nor the why.

⁶ The statistical data (deaths, contagions) change continually and are not homogeneous among different countries; a useful reference is *Our World in Data. Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)* (<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>).

One gets the impression that our political (and social) leaders have sought to foresee the future without being aware of the present nor how we have arrived where we are. What is clear is that not only do the number of Covid positive tests sometimes refer to the day before, sometimes to the week before, and sometimes even to the month before, but that data is mixed together from large and small municipalities and regions in a haphazard way (Ioannidis, 2020). At the same time, the news is misinterpreted. Bad news can be good depending on how you look at it: many more cases of infection are reported as a disaster but, although the denominator (the number of cases) may be higher, the mortality rate may be comparatively lower; thus perceptions and assessments of data become confused. As for the future, everything depends on the evolution of a curve which, as it is described, is a little mystifying, mixing data, in the expectation of “reaching the peak” and the “change in trend”.

In the meantime, different kinds of rhetoric have been rehearsed with which to manipulate public opinion, but almost always at the cost of dividing it. Many politicians call for unity but they do so by using words that seek to disparage and offend those to whom they appear to be reaching out. They miss no opportunity to attack a rival: which is understandable given that their customary delays usually go hand-in-hand with blindness in respect of their own errors and omissions while those of others are put under a microscope.

Social and economic challenges

The challenge of the pandemic to healthcare is taking place within the context of not only a political crisis but also economic and social ones of increasingly worrying dimensions. It has brought with it extraordinary difficulties for the economy of countries like Spain, causing a significant reduction in the growth rate and a drastic drop in activity. By way of example, one only has to remember that a reduction of some 6.5 % of Spanish GDP between 2019 and 2021 has been forecast (compared to 6 % for Italy, 4.4 % for France and 4.2 % for Portugal);⁷ and that by January 2021 youth unemployment of 39.9% was estimated for Spain, in comparison with about 14.0 % for the average of the OECD countries (and 29.7 % in Italy).⁸

Civil society as a whole has been ordered to remain in lockdown and reduce every kind of normal activity. This has meant a substantial alteration to expectations, not only as regards living standards but also lifestyles. In the extreme, this may lead to a reduced number of encounters and interactions,

⁷ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook*, October 2020.

⁸ OECD, “Unemployment rate by age group”. <https://doi.org/10.787/997c8750-en> (March 31, 2021).

and to the development of a more atomised and dispersed society: a breeding ground for submission and manipulation by both sides. With its movements and its contacts under control, society could become compliant, passive and impotent: likely to distrust everyone and everything as well as itself.

Tensions will tend to increase between different social categories. As regards social classes, the contraction and disruption of the economy caused by coronavirus will affect everyone but especially the most vulnerable, and especially those who have already seen their plans of upward social mobility vanishing over the last decade and a half. And with the ensuing risk of increasing inequality and precarity.

Care and neglect of the elderly

As for different age groups, if the risk is high for young people, it is far higher for the elderly. Once again, we are up against an example of the (counter)culture of misinformation. In general, exhortations to care for everyone together with appeals to perseverance and confidence in the future are, of course, praiseworthy. In the meantime, however, the general public is being accustomed to signals that some “very hard” decisions will have to be taken, and “some/many” allowed to die in order to save the economy. This could be seen to have merit: in the long-term a health system cannot exist without economic resources; but it runs the risk of abandoning the very elderly to their fate. In the case of Spain, these are no less than the survivors of the Civil War who went on to build the democratic country of today. Vulnerable old people who, it is now clear, are being neglected rather than cared for.

A substantial number of that generation are in residential care. In 2019, there were 373,000 elderly residents in care homes out of a population of over-eighty year-olds of 2,880,000 (Abellán García, Aceituno and Fariñas, 2019). The circumstances in which they live, however, are such that, even if unintentionally, they have become the pawns in a convoluted game of “care and neglect”. Although they have been given pensions, which cost the public purse increasingly more, and they are looked after, they are virtually confined in care homes with hardly any medical services. Once they are in those care homes, or perhaps in hospital or a nursing home, it is obvious how these elderly people start to decline. They are apparently worthless. Worthless because, it seems, their experience is no longer in demand, given that a modern economy requires re-learning everything every day and seems to dispense with experience. Worthless because they would continue to hold down jobs that other, younger people “should” have.

In general terms, contemporary policies do not seem to have been designed with the elderly in mind, but “for the future”: for those allegedly ambitious people with plans, ready to re-invent themselves and to succeed. Except that they are now more likely to live in perpetual “precarity”, distracted by the economic, political and cultural advertising in vogue. What will come later, in the small print, is euthanasia, cremation, the cemeteries without graves, the churches without services, the curtailed goodbyes, the funerary urns in cupboards, and the ashes scattered across seas and mountains. And a few words – if those who utter them have learned public speaking (not something that seems to be commonly taught in the schools of today).

In fact, the rhetoric that is being introduced, and explored, is that of saving the economy by accepting the slipping away of the elderly into... nothingness. This could entail an eloquent silence that would facilitate the death of tens of thousands (and perhaps millions of them across the world).

That said, it is possible that the extreme nature of this situation could produce certain moral progress whereby adults –and even young people– rediscover their parents, and shun the party culture and rituals of binge-drinking that are presented as paeans to life and self-affirmation. The Bastille disappeared over two centuries ago, and the streets of Paris are no longer lined with the cobbles that were used as projectiles half-a-century ago; but what will always remain is the indignation, the protests and the news bulletins. And it is not necessary to insist on “the eternal return” of a simulacrum of great deeds – we may hope that one day young people will rediscover the prospect of caring for their elders as a great achievement. (Perhaps as a feature characteristic of a culture of magnanimity...)

In seeking to justify neglect of the elderly, there has been an attempt to cast around for a reason, arriving at the distinction between thinking in terms of “human lives” and in “years of life”. As is logical from the point of view of those who consider that human beings can be divided up by different experiences, dimensions or age groups, it is thought to be appropriate to do so in terms of years of life. Younger people will, logically have more years of life ahead of them compared to older people and, therefore, one should think twice about investing public resources in the latter. An “objective calculation” has been made that the value of a human being in old age would come to be some 67 % (give or take) of that of a younger person (Porter and Tankersley, 2020). Hence, if the resources available are not sufficient to care for everyone, then it could be argued that it is preferable to care for those who are worth more (who will generate more resources for the system) because they have more years ahead of them; and provide less care for those with fewer years to live because, “objectively”, they are worth less. It would almost seem “right and fair”. In the

end, there would be fewer pensioners, which would save the public purse, and it would provide an additional stimulus, for example, to the cremation industry and affiliated jobs.

On the public space: mixed prospects

As we know, the pandemic has severely affected the economy, and the effects of lockdowns, for example, are visible both in the substantial reduction in economic activity, and in having caused ordinary people, producers and consumers, businesses and governments, to have to struggle on with far fewer resources. Everyone has been left searching for solutions provided by a kind of experimental economic policy, and remembering what it was possible to learn from the crisis of 2008-12, the crisis of the 1970s and even from that of 1929 – crises from which, however, not enough was ever learned to avoid the next one.

The argument will go on, defined primarily by battles over “more free market” or “more state intervention”. Such battles are usually seen in a favourable light by politicians, who tend to insist on the need to “show a united front” and “trust in our leadership” – but these are strange exhortations to be hearing from those who preach, indefatigably, division and distrust with respect to “the other half” of the country.

However, it is not easy to trust in leaders who, in addition to being divisive, do not seem to be especially competent. Who promise, perhaps, to provide resources (such as vaccinations) that are usually delayed. Who try to lay out a road map that, in reality, turns out to be no more than a confused and confusing experiment. Who belong to a government that is frequently changing direction, wavering between so-called hard measures and other so-called realistic ones, using imprecise language, and waiting to see whether events will, in the end, allow them to be self-congratulatory and/or lay the blame on others. (Which demonstrates an opportunistic attitude rather than the one of the *Character of a Trimmer*, who steers his boat, ready to adapt, but with a destination in mind: Halifax’s concept, collected by Oakeshott, 1996: 122 ff.).

All in all, it is clear that discussions held in the public space can have a crucial effect on the handling of the pandemic. The terms and arguments employed in speeches and slogans require translation and specification, but they can help to define the problems within some kind of context: lockdown or not, for example, and how strict it should be, how to get almost everyone back to work, or whether to allocate more or less money to certain sectors or others, etc. The debate, therefore, can bring what is being proposed out into the public space before a general public unaccustomed to anything other than

the semi-articulation of their own thinking, little given to listening and at times only half-aware, previously inattentive and, right now, frightened.

It appears that citizens, civil society, only partially trust their political leaders (or, should we say, their public-private leaders). Partially, or very little at all – in which case, it is as if, when they vote, they were taking part in a magical process. As if voters were voting predicated on little more than watching the flight of birds, scrutinising the entrails of animals or interpreting the movement of the stars, without knowing the whys or the wherefores. And one last detail: ultimately, people do not trust their leaders because they know how little they know. Although we should remember that people do also know other things: that although they can ignore, complain and get indignant about events, they can also gather enough civic courage to take the first steps along the path of civic debate, decision-making and action.

It does seem, therefore, that it is essential to take those first steps in order to learn something. To re-discover, for instance, the relevance of the advice given by Confucius on the “rectification of names”, in other words, “to call things by their right name” to better reflect the reality of things and of experiences. If language is no use to us because we give multiple, changeable and confusing meanings to words, then we cease to communicate among ourselves and, without communication, there can be no community. Nor any social order. We merely refer to values which we do not know if we share. We find ourselves with an empty culture, the content of which each one of us attempts to define according to how we feel at the time. We believed that a certain order existed but we wake up to a contradictory society; that we had a shared morality, but we find one that is fragmented.

In such a situation, it is logical that political life merely glosses a narrative of characters in search of an author, who will write the play that they can perform and –in its absence– people get on with life but in a state of confusion. Awaiting news. All of us self-isolating in our houses, waiting... Looking at the four walls of our house-cage, and the television screen. Just at a time when we most need to be cared for by others... there are no others. Just when we need to *keep calm and carry on* knowing what it is all about; we don't know what it is about. We go to our windows to make a gesture. (Or we shout: “I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this any more”, like Peter Finch in Sidney Lumet's film *Network*, 1976.) Or we close the window and we wait. There are still interesting alternatives: virtual encounters, silent moments, household chores, new hobbies, that could even turn out to be “really something”.

In short, the outlook is daunting in the extreme. The virus can attack through asymptomatic carriers. It may also return in a second wave, and a

third wave... And, as we know, it has already mutated and may do so again. Each success in the fight against it seems slight. At times, it seems as though we may be doomed to a world of almost indefinite isolation: of unpredictable alternations between lockdowns and freedom of movement; of innumerable rumours and half-truths.

It might even seem prudent, in these circumstances, to start wearing not just a facemask but a full-face visor, and live in it: creating a thicker and more permanent obstacle between us and the virus. Trying to defying this enigma which has turned our lives upside-down while we wait for findings to be deciphered, with our own masked presence like just one more enigma.

Then again, this could have its interesting aspects. We would have to learn to communicate anew and, in the absence of “innovating for innovation’s sake”, we could try and revert to some of our old practices. And we might discover, in fact, that our newer practices are disappointing. In other words: if we were astronauts orbiting the moon, we would likely be closer to our fellows than we are right now. Going around and around. Just like in a whirlwind. Or in a whirlpool, in the middle of a stormy sea, increasingly turbulent... and not knowing how long it will last.

On a more “optimistic and pragmatic” note

The above description will need adjustment in the light of future events as they occur over the next months and years; but, already, it requires a precautionary corrective and a boost of “pragmatism and optimism” (what David Brooks characterises as “the best of American liberalism”: *New York Times*, 16th December, 2020). It must take account of a scenario shaped both by political leaders anxious to reassure society and justify themselves, and by sceptics and realists who mistrust dramatic generalisations and have the courage to face up to the most disturbing data. Among these data are the management failures and rhetorical excesses of the élites in office (with that bitter-sweet sensation that nothing has ever changed) within the context of a continuous, or at least recurring, process of error correction.

If we adopt this perspective of “pragmatic optimism” then it should be pointed out, firstly, that it is normal to expect a somewhat erratic evolution of the pandemic (after all, the last one was a hundred years ago and the one before that –the Black Death, to which everyone refers– was nearly seven hundred years ago). Secondly, if there were no facemasks or tests or protective equipment for healthcare workers, it is reasonable to assume that, in time, there would be

– causing, in the meantime, moments of panic and anxiety interspersed with calm. Thirdly, that judgements have always been made, for example, on the basis of the varying life expectancies of different cohorts of patients, both actual and potential, when it comes to deciding on the healthcare budget. Fourthly, that, in any case, the data for each country must be viewed within the context of what is happening in all the others. These data have all tended to be quite worrying, and if they are worse in some countries, it is logical to expect these to learn from those which are performing better. Lastly, that, in time, it is to be hoped that immunity will develop across populations and that vaccines will continue to be discovered and distributed; which is exactly what appears to be happening at the end of 2020, and will continue throughout the coming year.

As for the economy, from that same perspective, we should be confident that the situation will start to improve thanks to a combination of what we could call the wisdom of the markets as well as that of experts and civil servants, the educated élites, and the masses. Consider, for example, the combination of the wisdom of politicians and citizens. Although the tendency of politicians is to fight for power among themselves, there may yet come a time when they pay attention to what their electorates think. For example, when they realise that, even though 96 % of the public want national pacts in order to combat the pandemic, only 29 % consider such pacts to be likely (from a survey by *Metroscopia* on 8th April, 2020: see *Círculo Cívico de Opinión*, 2020). In other words, we can be fairly confident that, sooner or later, politicians will remember their need to satisfy social demand if they wish to be elected or re-elected: a timely reminder which makes politicians fulfil their electoral promises with some frequency. Relatively sound pieces of civic wisdom may result from the further development of communications thanks to the media, social media and scientific progress. (Not forgetting the “wisdom of nature”: the transition from one season to the next, with the hottest ones being the least favourable for the further spread of the pandemic.)

There is no doubt that all this must be taken into account. Moreover, it is advisable to prevent any dramatic excesses insofar as it seems healthy to maintain a positive and hopeful frame of mind. All the more so because the future is, obviously, unpredictable, and a kind of secular wisdom reminds us that, as the Sufis say, “what has to happen, will happen”. Happen it will, but in the sense that it will lead on to something else. And yet, even so, it is precisely because of this unpredictable nature of the future, together with the intensity of the heightened perceptions and sensations of the present, added to the disorder of European and Spanish experiences in general, all of which is vexed further by the innumerable questions swirling around unanswered, that it is essential to preserve the fundamentals of that sensation of chaos. The greatest mistake in these circumstances would be to play down our predicament. First,

the damage that a worsening of the situation could engender is enormous; second, the probability that such a thing will happen is relatively high; and third, therefore, the resultant risk of multiplying the damage by the probability argues for a return to that image of the whirlpool.

4. The descent, the leap of faith, and the ascent from the maelström

The scene of the maelström

In short, citizens may, and perhaps do, perceive themselves as living in a mix of order and disorder, whereby capitalism brings with it, on the one hand, growth, work, a welfare system and freedom of movement but, on the other, recurring crises, the risk of poverty, inequality, precarity, subordination and exploitation. Therefore, democracy, the worst form of government except for all the others (Churchill *dixit*), has its inverse in partitocracy, distrust of political élites and a distorted public space. Therefore, although societies appear to be more connected, the fact is they fragment, they atomise and they become obsessed with their differences. Therefore, culture seems more capable of promoting and disseminating (natural) science, technology and information; and yet the narrative of shared experience escapes us, historic memory is a battlefield, and attempts at civic conversation take place in a space full of misunderstandings, more like a Tower of Babel.

Against this dramatic background of a general nature, specific cases stand out. One such is Spain, which is subject today to the tensions of this dreadful pandemic, a very challenging economic situation, the probable increase of social tensions as a result, and political manoeuvring to undermine territorial unity and the constitutional framework. At the same time, it has to withstand a political class determined to turn politics into confrontation and a game of mutual recriminations. All this is the result of a set of moral and cognitive dispositions and orientations endlessly reproduced by an extremely weak education system, as is demonstrated by the crudeness of a public debate that underscores the mediocrity of the political class as well as the timidity and inertia of civil society.

What “can be done”? Or rather, what “can we do” to remedy the situation? We could respond in the same way as Cervantes/Don Quixote who is, after all, our supreme universal symbol. We should remember what our hero tells us as he is setting out. Where is he going? What does he want to do? And what is he thinking about? Well, he is thinking “about the wrongs he would

right, the grievances redress, the absurdities rectify, the abuses improve and the debts settle" (Part 1, Chapter 2) which, in more prosaic (generic and abstract) language comes to mean "imposing a little order on a chaotic world."

That is how our protagonist comes to set off across the broad plains of Castille, through La Mancha, letting himself be taken by his horse. Through those vast lands, like the high seas, open to the four winds. If we follow the trail of literary images, and transport ourselves through space and time, to the New England of the second half of the nineteenth century, it can lead us to an allegory that allows us to sketch out an *ad hoc* argument, observe a sequence and draw a conclusion.

Imagine being spun around in the middle of a whirlpool, and our hero, or we ourselves, have no time to waste in deciding what to do about it. A whirlpool out in the ocean. What are the odds of sinking or floating? Of disappearing or surviving? The allegory is to be found within the tale by the American writer and poet, critic and journalist, born in Boston, Massachusetts some two centuries ago, Edgar Allan Poe. It is called *Descent into the Maelström* (1978 [1841]), which is a stimulating and enlightening read with which to face up to our current predicament. Dramatic but not fatalistic; hopeful but challenging.

The story begins with the narrator looking out to sea from the edge of a high cliff, from where he makes out what seem to be the contours of a huge circle far out in the open sea, where the water is surging and frothing and there is a far-off muffled roaring. Accompanying him is an old man, white-haired, with an air of exhaustion, who tells him that he has been there.

He goes on to explain that his fishing smack was swept off course and tossed around in powerful cross-currents until he and his brother found themselves on the edge of an immense whirlpool. The boat was spun around and around as it was drawn in and began to sink. He clung on to the shrouds, and to the sails, with all his might. He saw the boat surrounded by gyrating debris of all kinds, timber, masts and spars. They were desperate. He saw his brother about to go under. The noise was deafening, the speed increasing, the darkness intensifying.

In the midst of it all, the only thing remaining to him was... curiosity. A kind of passion to know, to understand, as much as he was able, what was happening. He looked carefully. And after some time he realised that, although much of the debris sank down into the abyss that seemed to swallow it up, not all of it did. In fact, there were objects that spun and spun but did not sink and were not engulfed and dragged to the bottom. Some of them even seemed to be rising up. He took note of what they were. They were... like barrels. They

were cylinders: perhaps, he speculated, their shape reduced or deflected the pressure of the ocean currents.

He could not be sure of the explanation for what he was seeing and, perhaps, he thought, he did not have the facility to explain it. But he was sure that his observations were telling him that, after all, the barrels escaped being sucked to the bottom. They bobbed back up. It was a fact.

Without further thought, gambling on that vague, inexplicable perception, an instinct for survival, a tentative intuition, and facing imminent death, he called out to his brother, in similar straits, to try and save himself. But he didn't reply. At the very last minute, with time running out, he decided to jump... and he jumped onto one of the barrels. Lashing himself to it, he began to spin round and round but he was rising upwards... And he reached the surface of the water, and, eventually, the beach. Now here he is, on the cliff, telling his story, with his hair turned white from shock, absorbed in his memories, having lived through something almost impossible to share except by the telling of it: to the poet. And the poet, to us...

Three steps: curiosity, a leap of faith, and where to go and what to avoid

And so, what can we do? We can use this story for our own purpose. We are in the middle of a maelström *sui generis*, a chaos affecting our healthcare, politics, economy, culture and society and we must try and escape from the abyss. What we need to do is to look closely, to watch out for "a barrel", to "work out a theory" or not even work one out... but just do *something* on the basis of plausible intuition. To put it another way, we are talking about two actions: to observe-and-reason and then to decide. If we consider the handling of the pandemic, for example, then curiosity leads us to observe and to reason as much about the application of science as the use of common sense and a rational public space. It is not, however, only a case for reasoning: it is also, and above all, about throwing ourselves onto "a barrel", seizing hold of it and hanging on for dear life.

This story of the maelström can be interpreted as quite a complex allegory. It should not be reduced merely to a symbol of chaos (confusion and violence), but seen as a story that contains a number of connecting elements. It is a question of understanding the complete sequence of the descent and the ascent, as a whole, and not only the descent.⁹ One has to take into account

⁹ Focus on the phase of descent can be seen in the discussion on politics in the United States in the 1960s as being the forerunner of the politics of division (Cohen, 2016).

the debris whirling around (the abandoned boat, the barrel onto which he leaps) and the three steps taken by the protagonist: his assessment of the situation, his leap of faith, and what he clings on to and where it takes him. That involves interpreting, first, what it means to take that leap; second, the meaning of the barrel onto which he leaps; and third, what the abyss could be from which he is trying to escape. (These questions involve an assessment, a risk, a possible community of conversation and of action – and a moral and emotional commitment to avoiding external and internal chaos, without falling into the temptation of timidity or inertia.)

To leap is to gamble. This is the equivalent of a Pascalian or, one could say, a “Napoleonic” notion or (to take the comparison still further) even a “Leninist” one (Walicki, 1979) – insofar as the latter appropriated the words of Napoleon when, asked what his grand strategy was, he replied: “*on s’engage et puis on voit...*”, [you commit yourself, and then you see...] and they did indeed see the sometimes disastrous results.

Nevertheless, the quotation is misleading, because what Napoleon does not say is that his *engagement*, or commitment, begins through curiosity and includes reasoning. Decisions make sense based on motivation and one’s judgement of a situation. The reasoning may be that of a narcissist, an autistic person, a sensible patriot, a competent military strategist or a patient in a psychiatric hospital (who believes that he is Napoleon). Similar reasoning could be applied to the leap from the maelström and to the barrel. The sense of it comes from the combination of a reactive impulse –fleeing chaos and death– and a proactive one – survival and an aspiration for order and peace. Whatever the reasoning, it is a commitment to a course of action, an existential decision, a mixture of speculation and sensations, memories and projects which accompany the sequence of the leap. To put it another way, it is the first step that leads on to the subsequent ones which begin to form a path.

The image of a “barrel”

Nonetheless, a leap onto... a barrel? This is, at first sight a strange image. The barrel is, however, a protected and protective space in which to be safe – protected by its convexity and the sturdiness of the staves and hoops. Just the opposite of the mass of splinters which the wreck of the boat is about to become, and from which the sailor is trying to escape. He abandons the community of the sinking ship and he takes a leap to what is, or what could become, another community.

The barrel can be a symbol for a space shared with others, where the experience of a community develops with... some “others”, with whom there is sufficient common cause to stay together; to play together. Thus, they are invited to the common game of staying afloat, just as the sailor invites his brother – who turns a deaf ear.

We could also consider the barrel as being the object of a mutation or transfiguration. As if we did not simply remain outside it, clinging on to it. The barrel has an opening: if we go inside, we find... a room: a space where one can argue, play, meditate, make decisions. The barrel may even undergo a new metamorphosis in classical Ovidian fashion and be transformed... into a house – like the flying house of Judy Garland in the Wizard of Oz (the film directed by Victor Fleming in 1939, over eighty years ago). It is whisked away by a tornado into a different universe and she opens the door and finds... the yellow brick road which will lead her, and lead all of us, to the doors of the castle of the eponymous wizard. Our heroine and her companions, pilgrims all, set out on a journey to find their way Over the Rainbow, and it will eventually take them all back home.

However, the image of the barrel in this story says less to us about flying and returning home than it does about staying afloat and surviving. Although our protagonist does more than just survive: he tells his story to a stranger, the poet-narrator, so that it will be passed on to us and we... should do something with it. One step leads to the next and they all fit together, the same as in a ballet.

Strictly speaking, the barrel-object as such does not correspond to, or does not relate, to the person clinging onto to it as subject to subject. It is more like a metaphor for a space in which an encounter takes place between the one clinging to the barrel and... those who make room for him inside it, help him to tie himself in and to endure the struggle. They have opened a door for him, sat him at the table and, being different, and faithful to their differences, engage in a debate or a conversation together. And the conversation turns into a game... a chess game? It is as if the leap to the gyrating barrel were giving us the opportunity to find ourselves in a conversation space and a potential community, but for what purpose? To play a game? To make peace? To avoid chaos?

If we find a conversation space, it is not for the kind of conversation *à la française* that is simple diversion –to display sparkling wit and ingenuity– that Madame de Staël (1965 [1813], vol. I: 101 ff.) contrasted to the typical German conversation between “*esprits sérieux*”, each obsessed with taking their arguments to their ultimate conclusion. This is a space for a conversation

different to both of these: open, and leading to agreements and disagreements in a process of moving forward, or getting by, together.

What must be avoided is the chaos and the extremes of entropy at the bottom of the abyss. As a metaphor, the splintering apart and breaking-up of the boat caused by the whirlpool becomes the effect on society of disconnection, disorder, inertia and nothingness. In other words, of a state of existence that is no existence at all; and which, in terms of human feelings and ways of being in the world, could be called depression, sadness or idleness. The brother of our sailor remains on his boat, even as it is sinking and as he cannot make up his mind to jump, he is drowned. He lets this happen, he fails to act, and thereby allows the chaos of the world to continue. This can occur in a climate of desperation and misery amid shouts of despair; and yet more often, it is in a climate of apathy and resignation and passes unnoticed.

Is the abyss of Europe one of indifference and sadness? Or is it rather one of mediocrity? A Europe that is provincial, self-centred and content to misremember what it has been wont to call its past triumphs, colonies and conquests, ready to be re-imagined through the prism of the ideology, the mentality and the commonplaces of each moment? A Europe not knowing what to do with, or for, the rest of the world? It is without internal peace, and without a genuine mission for peace in a world that now wonders if it was actually owned by it for two or three centuries, with its relatively ephemeral accomplishments, part glorious and part dubious.

Today, it is a Europe of reciprocal indifference (let us remember, with Proust, the small step that separates indifference from cruelty; 1954 [1917]: 165]) and not one based on friendship. It is the indifference that results from lost friendship; and the sadness that results from the breakdown of a friendship. One that was built around common experiences, over and above the interplay of interests and ideas; and it is disappearing.

I include personal, deeply felt and genuine testimony from a Spanish lawyer and businesswoman, who has been resident in England for many years, talking about her experience of Brexit. It underlines not only the sadness of the recent parting but also the sadness of seeing a “having-lived-together” becoming a “having-believed-we-lived-together”. In her own words, “You know how you feel when you have given everything for someone and, when you least expect it, they ditch you as if you meant nothing to them? Well, change ‘person’ to ‘country’ and that’s how I feel about the United Kingdom leaving the European Union: desertion, a tremendous disappointment and, above all, sadness, so much sadness. We Europeans who have come to live in the United Kingdom (...) we have built our lives here with the British... paid our taxes, helped to

build their businesses (...) brought up our children, made friends, supported initiatives (...) treated their country as if it were our own (...) loved their country as if it were our own.” (González Durántez, 2020).

In turn, the sadness of lost friendship can prolong an earlier mutual indifference; that may surface again at any moment. For example, the kind that was observed in the initial European reaction to the pandemic which was, strangely enough, for members to distance themselves from each other. Only later, when reconsidering, thinking about what was in their best long-term interests, did the different countries began a conversation with a view to possible health and economic coordination, envisaging major plans – and we shall see what happens. In any case, whether it proves to be a breaking of ties or a leaping together, the possibility remains open to take a gamble and play the game.

The leap of faith, and a game with an underlying strategy and a long-term objective

The combination of the various crises described above leaves us facing a dramatic choice between a civilised society or a chaotic deviation – a sort of Pascalian wager between justice and chaos (Pascal, 1950 [1659-1661]: section 3). This choice, the battle between the two, is being played out on many fronts. In an earlier essay (Pérez-Díaz, 2020), I suggested the image of a series of simultaneous chess games as providing a strategic vision of the whole. The “leap onto the barrel” would be one of these games: a game of strategic scope that conditions the objective and, therefore, the direction, depth and timescale of the ongoing process.

The objective can be defined in many different ways, depending on the perspective that one adopts. The one I adopt here is rooted in the memory of the West and corresponds to a tradition –intermittent within it (and others)– which has existed for some two and a half thousand years; and which the culture of modernity has been attempting to reconfigure with varied (and limited) success for the last few centuries. In this case, the objective would be to move closer to the ideal of a “civilised and reasonable” society; understood as one in which a market economy (an expression of personal freedom) is incorporated into, and is part of,¹⁰ a whole that further includes a welfare system, a sound regulatory framework, a limited state, a participative liberal democracy, a lively and autonomous public space, a state of law and the division of powers. This is

¹⁰ In Polanyi’s (1992 [1944]) terms, it would be embedded in this whole, to which I usually refer as “civil society in a broad sense” (Pérez-Díaz, 2014).

an institutional whole animated and inspired by, and based on, a complex and fragmentary culture that attempts to combine recognition of personal freedom with a moral responsibility of care for others and for the community as such. An essential component of that whole is a free, plural and dynamic associative fabric. An associative fabric (formal and informal, and including the family) without which all the rest become corrupted – the market, the public space, democracy and the law – and without which, culture, in particular, withers away, swamped by doctrines, exhortations, ideas and words left hanging meaningless in the air.

This objective of a rational society reconciled with itself is by no means, and nor is it intended to be, the latest innovation. In reality, a similar model to the one that I have outlined has been a recurring reference point of our historical experience and, wholly or partly, it is frequently (increasingly?) remembered even now. We can consider this (ambitious) objective as a plausible (possible and desirable) one that forms an important part of a traditional European collective imagery, with different tonalities and settings from one country to another. It is rather like a polar star, a sign on the horizon and, as such, already a part of the landscape – even though we may be very conscious that the effective realisations of this model in history have tended to be little more than either ‘second best’ or the ‘lesser evil’ in comparison with the alternatives at the time. (Pérez-Díaz, 2014).

How important is the knowledge that the realisation of this objective is problematic? Perhaps not that much because although, on the one hand, realism obliges us to recognise that the ideal society is subject to recurrent oligarchic and demagogic tendencies, and that this reality is resistant to good intentions; on the other hand, this resistance to reality can prove to be useful. For example, it can serve as an incentive for resolving to be patient and persevering; and for adapting to and observing and learning from the zigzagging path of the past and from the many ongoing experiments of the present. It could even encourage us not to falter in the effort to keep our sights set high and to cultivate a magnanimous spirit. In order to do that, we can turn, among other things, to a fund of auspicious symbolisms that includes, for example, the image of the Sienese dance celebrating the peace of *buon governo* [good government] in the frescoes by Lorenzetti (once again Tuscany and the Late Middle Ages...) (Skinner, 2002). It is an image twinned with the rhetoric of political power seen as the key not to mere anti-Machiavellianism but to the belief that “to govern is to serve” which comes to be a kind of equivalent to the “maternal government” (*sicut mater*) recommended by St. Francis of Assisi in his letter to Brother Leo.¹¹

¹¹ Possibly part of a retrospective (and a post-modern?) utopia of “medieval democracy” (Dalarun, 2012).

All this reminds us how much magnanimity there can be in humility; and how much greatness in small things (and how much of the present in the apparently anachronistic). And at this point, I shall conclude this paper by focusing on the detail of the associative fabric.

5. The strategic importance of small spaces, ordinary people and civil society

Small spaces and big projects

Big projects require close attention to detail. When it comes to designing and implementing a strategy for achieving the main objective of a society such as the one that I have been describing, it would be necessary to coordinate or, at the very least, take account of a number of tasks and their corresponding simultaneous games. These would include finding a voice on the world geopolitical stage, undertaking ambitious social and economic policies, major structural reforms, the nurturing of complex rites and narratives, the general introduction of a policy calculated to create institutional incentives which would act as levers that guided, in one way or another, people's behaviours, the strengthening of a legal system that minimises the risk of violence, and many other things. But I now wish to concentrate on a single, crucial strategic piece that is, however, often overlooked.

In short, all the major policies and strategies mentioned above require to be implemented and continued over time; this, in turn, requires a citizenry among whom what we could call, in Aristotelian fashion, "the virtues of the multitude" tend to prevail (Cammack, 2013). Although it is true to say that the élites are in charge, the reality is that they do not have that much authority, and neither do historical processes tend to obey them in the way that they would like. Thus, in the long term, they need a certain amount of consensus, acquiescence and collaboration on the part of their citizens, who may not merely accept future public policies and reforms but should participate in discussions about them; and might even initiate and experiment with them on their own account – and come to educate their own élites by means of massive amounts of common sense and a sense of the commons.

At the same time, being realistic, we should remember that (in the light of experience through the ages) citizens are as likely to behave in a reasonable and civic fashion as they are to behave badly in a clientilistic or anti-social manner, for example; or like people who are bi-polar who alternate submission

with resentment, or who allow themselves to be duped into hunting for and persecuting scapegoats at the behest of the demagogues and inquisitors in power.

The answer to the question of whether a society will behave in one way or another depends largely on the presence or absence within it of a certain kind of associative fabric: the kind in which the socio-cultural spaces can be found that are necessary for individuals to be able to form habits of reasonableness and civism, and respect for the differences and freedom of others, together with the disposition for cooperation and fair competition. These spaces should also allow for people to develop their capacity for observing reality, challenging their own and others' judgments, and organising their thoughts and expressing them in public. Such socio-cultural spaces are of varying sizes, but generally quite modest and accessible, and they allow the formation and development of the habits and character appropriate for taking an active part in a political community.

Returning to the literary metaphors above, the image of the barrel that the shipwrecked man clung to so tightly evokes just such a protective and protected space (and it is a space similar to the circle of Dorothy's companions as they make their way along the yellow brick road to Oz). It harks back to our earliest experience of small spaces, and of mutual concern and support: communities at play, at work or at school, a varied associative fabric and socio-family networks that make possible the combination of interactions, organisation and feelings of the small groups that constitute the elemental forms of society (Homans, 1961). They are not the most famous or most powerful parts of a society but it could be said that, in the same way that to be useless can be the key to what is most useful (Leys, 2012), true greatness (the habitual aim of the magnanimous) can be found and, perhaps, better understood in terms of the most humble.

On the here and now

Focusing attention on the associative fabric offers us an opportunity to commit to a broad but discreet strategy *sui generis*, of "guerrilla warfare" designed for action "right away" (rather than the deferred action typified by Larra's satirical phrase of "Vuelva usted mañana" [come back tomorrow]); that is, in the here and now of each individual in their own immediate surroundings.

From this perspective, the leap from the abyss of the maelström could be reformulated in terms of *carpe diem* –of seizing the day– considering it as a unique opportunity as well as an expression of gratitude for the miracle of being alive, and of being together, and thus, of understanding and being

capable of taking action. Understanding, taking action, each of us individually, and with others; and, in this way, taking responsibility without leaving things to remote officials – such as politicians, for example. Once we have set out, we must continue; as if the reason for being and the very being of each one of us were our path; as if, for the mountaineer, the path that leads to the top is already the top (Söhngen, 1961: 80).

Conversely, not to make the leap, “not to do anything”, would be an indication of not understanding things, and witness to the inertia of someone who, refusing to jump, resigns himself to being carried away by the whirlpool into oblivion. (No doubt complaining and indignant all the while, but with less and less conviction on finding himself increasingly alone; or –the irony, perhaps, of human ambiguity– resigned to what appears to be divine election.)

Ultimately, a grand strategy whose ultimate objective is the achievement of a free and viable society, reconciled with itself, can only succeed by means of some variant of a “politics of virtue” (Milbank and Pabst, 2016) that surpasses mere politics; in other words, a living culture that encompasses the diverse lifestyles of its citizens in general. It cannot be a culture that is reduced to proclaiming certain values, but one understood as a performance and as a way of life; of a virtuous and courageous way of life. This is particularly relevant to ordinary people, who can only exercise adequate control over (and educate) their élites if, at the same time that they rein in the latter’s arrogance, they resist their own tendency (their temptation) to submit to voluntary servitude.

Taking account of the tactician perspective of the “pragmatic optimists”

The building of a political community is a task for everyone and not just the elites. The elites themselves know this very well, although they take on their role of protagonists in public life with enthusiasm. Accustomed to managing the system on a day-to-day basis, and to appear to do so in times of crisis, it is understandable that they tend to assume a rather “pragmatic and optimistic” attitude when they refer to a sequence of events (almost always “under control”) or to the attainment of their goals (although always needing some compromises). Their tempo is somewhat accelerated/startling, but they enjoy many breaks, not only to relax and enjoy their celebrity but also to perfect their political techniques, giving them an opportunity to refine their cunning, and their discretion.

They soon learn that, on important issues, the acquiescence of ordinary people, which they need so much, can be a short-lived commodity. This is largely because, when dealing with complicated issues like, for example, the

economy (or the environment or geopolitics), the basic data is abundant, complex and (as the devil is in the detail) difficult to understand. Thus, however much they try to simplify the debate with left and right-wing heuristics, and different collective identities, for the purpose of obtaining the acquiescence of their citizens, the fact is that the general public endorses public policies *only to a certain degree*. Truth be told, the attachment of “the masses” (a term fallen into some disrepute) to the slogans, the programmes and the images of their leaders is usually revealed to be temporary and superficial. All the more so when, whether they admit it or not, citizens have not really learned the lessons of the past and, besides, they do not trust their politicians very far.

These reservations on the part of society lend a certain fragility to all the major strategic decisions that are taken; long-lasting and reasoned support from society simply does not exist. This has repercussions due to the fact that any agreement among the élites already tends to be fragile and will be come under attack as soon as there is any change in the balance of power: almost, it could be said, from the day it is signed. This highlights the advisability of having a clearly-defined course of action that will serve as a reference for the decisions that are taken, and as a horizon for the current state of affairs. In this way, it will allow a dialogue that will make it possible to feel that we are learning as much from the fulfilment of expectations as from their non-fulfilment.

By way of example, and to illustrate the need for a course of action and an objective in the long-term, I would cite the importance of the project to create a space of friendship between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. This, in its turn, would be connected to the objective of uniting Europe (and it could also have profound consequences for the handling of the pandemic). Being realistic (or “pragmatic”), one has to recognise that, without a space of friendship (or at least one in the process of creation) the integration of Catalonia in Spain will seem as forced to the two million who support independence as its separation will seem to the two million who are opposed to it, and the rest of the Spanish population. “Forced” means imposed, therefore generating resentment and hostility. This would affect not only Spain but the whole of Europe, which would see how a focal point had been created for continual or recurring disagreements of differing degrees of severity but often very worrying, in a crucial area of its territory, halfway between the Atlantic and the western Mediterranean. It is obvious that this would be an incentive for the development of further inter-state and inter-regional tensions; and that, in geopolitical terms, it would mean a highly dangerous vulnerability.

Once more, it is here that the (limited and biased) perspective of the pragmatists can contribute indirectly to a better understanding of the situation. Because we should be asking: how is it possible to move forward with an

ambitious, mythopoetic and religious/caring project of a reconciled human community, or a space of friendship, if the “practical details” of economic, political and social conflicts are neglected? In which case, exhortations run the risk of becoming irrelevant. Great ideals are reduced to fine words.

That said, (and continuing this line of argument), in order to achieve immediate and tangible results, the *first* step is... that every one should take their first step, they should be responsible for what they do, and they should find a way of taking the next step. Everyone should feel a little like Socrates, who asks his question and takes note of the answer of the oracle, of his inner voice and that of his close community, as well as of what he finds, resists and he remakes, with his “Socratic dialogues” and with the many tasks of living and fighting together.

Hence, the ordinary citizens of our contemporary societies can, on the one hand, understand, criticise, correct and demand accountability, and on the other, do something for themselves. Or, what comes to the same thing, they can take an active part in the public debate and organise innumerable initiatives on their own account, without waiting for permission. They can apply a measure of common sense based on their everyday experience, and largely corroborated (with a reasonable margin for doubt) by the popular and sapiential wisdom of millennia. There is no need of an academic education, political indoctrination, dogmatism, a publicity campaign or any special business or technological innovation.

By way of an afterword

It is a matter of getting down to work, nose to the grindstone. Getting through all the work involved in academic courses, jobs, businesses, healthcare, information and the form and content of communications, facemasks, the use of languages, family benefits and/or allowing families to help themselves – and the continuous “rectification of names” that must go on alongside these constant endeavours. Issue by issue, being able to distinguish the whole but taking things step by step. It is up to us all, one by one, and yet with each other. Up to us to decide to vote, to raise our voices, to take action – and, with our individual decisions, will come the experience and the awareness of how little everything means if it is not all being done with others.

The proposal to combine the vision of the ultimate objective with the succession of immediate actions indicates a strategy of “overcoming” the crisis rather an “exit” from it. This, in turn, requires the agents in question to use their skills in comprehension and interpretation, allowing for their own perspectives

and strategies, influenced as these are by their life experiences, and by a range of symbolisms of diverse origin – including those deriving from the sapiential wisdom of the Axial Age, and of many cultural traditions, up to the present day.

I have illustrated the thrust of my argument with many references and I conclude with a brief mention of the visual arts and literature – images and narratives. The image of *Il buon governo* by Lorenzetti expresses the aspirations and nostalgia of a community reconciled. It portrays a dance of peace and magnanimity, and of life, which would flourish with more vigour because of it. But the idyll is interrupted by a crisis, a war or a plague. The visual image gives way to a narrative one: in which the circle is broken up, and the boat sinks in the middle of a whirlpool – Poe’s Maelström. Then a reaction occurs, the “leap onto the barrel”, whose upward momentum makes it look as if the water has become lava, and the black hole, a volcano in eruption. This volcano, with its rivers of earth and fire, of solid forms, appears in the abstract expressionist painting of *El cráter* [The Crater] by Marina Olivares – the hole is transmuted into a mountain that surges upwards, revolving and growing (Olivares, 1999: figure 23). Could we say that, thrusting upwards, it reaches beyond the stars? If so, it is as if a new character, and a character very dear to us, unannounced but not unexpected, were finally revealed. And we would witness the scene of Europa, abducted and liberated, from the ode by Horace (*Odes*, Book Three, XXVII, 29-32) – “she who sought flowers in the meadows / and weaving crowns the nymphs to please / and now, in gloomy night she looks on nought / but only stars and seas” – continuing her search, beyond the heavens and the oceans.

Chapter 2

Overcoming mutual rejections: The problems of civic conversation, and the example of Catalonia

Introduction

In an earlier essay, I suggested that we should consider political problems as if they were games of chess, being played as multiple simultaneous matches (Pérez-Díaz, 2020). Victories, defeats and rankings would follow one another, over and over again, and each match would have its own prize, but the final victory would remain to be seen – it could come... right at the end, or at any time. I now propose a game that, in a sense, goes hand-in-hand with all the others: that of the control of feelings of mutual rejection. I examine this by focusing on a personal experience while emphasising the socio-cultural breadth of the underlying problem – which is far more than just an incidental tactical one.

The underlying challenge is that of winning or losing the game of how to hold together a political community (Europe or Spain, for example) and overcoming or (at least provisionally) circumventing the possibility, or the probability, of spiralling feelings of reciprocal mistrust. Such feelings could overshadow the whole, threatening to cause chaos and darkness. They prevent the formation of a solid foundation for civic friendship, which is indispensable for producing and reproducing a plausible political community. A community, that is, that will be able to last – and even to last for a very long time – just as any European nation-state or a Roman *civitas* might dream about lasting for a millennium.

In this case, we could attempt to reinforce the European political community, for example. However, it should be done by taking account of not only (and not so much) the ideas and interests argued over in the debates, and the continuous manoeuvring, but the feelings (and the moral dispositions) of the people. And it should also be done in a certain way: indirectly, by focusing attention on how one of the European nation-states (Spain) and one of its territories or regions (Catalonia) fit together. This would be justified for two reasons. Firstly, because what we ascertain at the nation-state level may be useful to us, by analogy, at the European level. Secondly, because, in order for the project of an integrated Europe to come to fruition, it is essential that its constituent parts, its nation-states, have the internal coherence and stability necessary in order to avoid

any one of them becoming a source of contagion. To the contrary, this would aggravate an already chaotic situation and foster the creation of a kind of black hole into which a large part of our energies (of Europeans, of Spaniards and of Catalans) would be sucked, for far too long. And the ultimate consequence of that would be a Europe that is “eternally in the making” – a variant of what Voegelin called “that famous Europe which does not exist” (1989).

I focus on a “Catalan problem” which, in reality, includes a number of problems of adjustment between Spain as a nation-state in existence for the last five centuries, and Catalonia, as one of its key territorial, cultural and institutional components throughout that time. Over the last decade, half of the latter’s electorate has demonstrated its desire for independence from Spain and the other half, to remain part of it. I examine the feelings of trust between the two halves. I do not attempt to offer a description and far less a complete explanation of the ongoing process, but merely an exploratory essay and, in some way, an invitation to a conversation.

As regards method, I introduce a variety of material into this essay: statistics, news, philosophical and literary references, and personal testimonies. I include the latter in order to be able to better understand the perspective from which I view the problem, and I invite the reader to do the same. In this way, we can become involved in a conversation parallel to, and connected with, the civic conversation or public debate that is taking place at this time. This means engaging in a process of shared reasoning, making use of what John Newman (1979 [1870]) called an “illative sense”, that is, one with which we uncover the truth and forge our consent to it in multiple ways, by means of conversation, in search of a relative, and elusive, consensus which will, in its turn, be put to the test as we continue to move forward.

I develop my argument in two clearly differentiated parts: the first is of a very general nature whereas the second is centred on the subject of Catalonia. I propose to consider the present moment as a drama open to various possibilities, and to approach it from the perspective of a (let us say, Pascalian) bid to understand the disorder and bring it to an end, thanks largely to the presence of a political community that is self-aware and responsible for itself. However, the alternative option also exists: the continuance of a culture of noise, with the corresponding disorder, with which it is thought we can “continue to live”.

I note the sense of insecurity with which we regard this disorder. Accustomed as we are (in Europe and in Spain) to a centuries-old history of certain collective subjects –some “us”– in the form of nation-states (or their equivalents), it is logical that we feel bewildered at the present time. There would be no point in denying it. It is inevitable. We must begin from this point,

and with good reason. Because, while some casual observers deplore feelings of national identity as “emotionalism”, in reality, although these feelings may be confused they are not false and they are important to bear in mind. Perhaps they are some of those confused perceptions (as Leibniz would say) with which human beings are accustomed to living, in the belief that *they have to live with them* in the absence of any others.

I go on to outline a straightforward analysis of the conditions of resilience and weakness inevitable to every civic conversation that is associated with the sense of relative fragility of every political community.¹² I do so citing our condition as agents or, in other words, as “transient survivors” who, as such, bear an existential insecurity which is made even more difficult to handle in times like the present, moving at a fast pace, with a lot of noise, and only half-shared collective stories and rituals.

In the second part, I develop my argument by moving on to the relationship between Spain and Catalonia. I suggest that creating a *foundation of civic friendship* would substantially reduce that existential insecurity. I analyse a case, just one small incident, that calls into question the friendship, and I have chosen the case to indicate how a denial of friendship, according to how we handle it, can, paradoxically, contribute to the formation of a friendly space. I base this on my own personal experience and, given that I am resolved to examine how to turn an obstacle into an advantage (“the consideration of contrariness” proposed by Gracián in Discourse VIII in his *Agudeza y Arte de Ingenio* [Wit and the Art of Inventiveness]), I explore the subject of how we can put “feelings of rejection” and “unfair criticism” to good use; insofar as such criticism highlights a kind of resistance to reality in the arguments of all sides, including our own, and tests our capacity for empathy and, by extension, for learning.

Lastly, I refer to two factors that could either facilitate or impede that learning. It is likely that the use and abuse of distortion in the public space will impede it. Leaving aside analysis of the systemic background of such distortion (that is, the bias and degree of “falsity” that generally accompanies the normal operation of economic and political systems), I refer to certain sources/foci of distortion and, more specifically, to the role of different kinds of prevaricators. This role is the reverse of that of the “enlightened benevolent” or, as Leibniz described them, “enlightened persons of good intention”. The latter would try to apply justice with wisdom, understood as a *caritas sapientis* (Riley, 1996; Leibniz, 2011 [1692]); and they (and Leibniz, as a philosopher, diplomat, jurist, politician and driving force of enlightened society) would contribute in this way to a better world of peace and of balance, of love and knowledge; in sharp contrast to the chaotic world of continual and forceful distortion.

¹² Expanding on the subject of the fragility of political forms to which I refer in Pérez-Díaz (2017).

I finish with praise for “the unusual”: a reference to the (possibly utopian) ideal of the political community as a space for friendship. The aim is for more than simple (though laudable) tolerance (understood as a “painful coexistence” by Ortega in his discourse on the Catalan problem of 13th May, 1932) and even for more than mere benevolence and enlightenment. The aim is to discern a pathway from “self-interested friendship” to “true friendship”. What would be “unusual” would be an emotional and moral impulse similar to respect and admiration for what is different, to the culture of praise, and to magnanimity: all virtues that may seem, in the so advanced and so supposedly realistic times in which we live, a little anachronistic. (Rather like those of Don Quixote?)

I know that my allusion to the ideal of political friendship, a key part of the argument, needs to be developed further, and I hope to do so more extensively elsewhere. In addition, my occasional references to thinkers of the seventeenth century – that extraordinary century of chiaroscuro – such as Leibniz, Gracian and Pascal, to their graded observations, their appeal to ingenuity, their awareness of contradictions and their sense of commitment, are a way of reaffirming how the human sciences of today are rooted in an earlier tradition of philosophy and the humanities. They are also a way of invoking an ideal, that of the political community as a space for friendship and, at the same time, of emphasising the need for the most realistic analysis possible of the complexity of the agents and of the variety of circumstances.

I believe that this is more urgent than ever in these times of huge turbulence. And if these times are turbulent, those to come will be even more so as we suffer the consequences of the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and economic crises. We can console ourselves with the knowledge that European civil wars are a thing of the past, from whose incivility we still have so many lessons to learn.

1. The bid for a political community

1.1. In a confusing time

Spain is obviously not the only European country that is subject to a worsening of internal tensions today. In fact, it shares a labile situation and an uncertain future with many others, to which we might apply the words that a political scientist and economist friend, Michele Salvati uses to describe Italy: “*tutto è ancora in mente Dei*” [“all is now in the mind of God” or “all is still in the lap of the gods”] (2020). Which means, among other things, that we are

facing an open drama in which just a few years seems an inordinately long time in which “anything could happen”. There could be one, two or five years of a provisional *modus vivendi* – or eight years, as suggested by another politician and academic, Andreu Mas-Colell (2019),¹³ who is a close observer of events in Catalonia. Or perhaps even thirty?

On the other hand, this provisional situation offers an opportunity to enlarge and complicate the political playing field. The usual games are, and will continue to be, of fundamental importance: those concerning declarations, summit meetings, elections, economic measures, human rights, historic narratives, diplomacy, media propaganda; without forgetting the basic issue of maintaining law and order, which would exclude recourse to physical violence. What I propose here, however, is that, without disregarding those games, we should concentrate on playing and winning a *different game*: that of controlling feelings of rejection among adversaries, which is crucial for a grand strategy in the medium to long-term with a view to European construction.

This particular game must be placed in context, bearing in mind that the context is partly constant and partly changeable, and may be very changeable. Right now, we are living in a time of intense localised upheaval, in which each moment seems to have a strange urgency which may get worse or simply become a kind of melodramatic routine. For example, just in *the last week of February, 2020*, as I began to write this piece,¹⁴ the populist, socialist government of Spain initiated activities which were called, ambiguously, negotiations and conversations, with a Catalan regional government of nationalist-separatists which laid down as a condition of the negotiation/conversation the recognition of a relationship of equals between itself and the Spanish state (thereby challenging the sovereignty of the Spanish people who, it is assumed, were/are the cornerstone of the current constitutional system), as well as what it considers to be the right of Catalonia to self-determination (which the Constitution does not recognise) and an amnesty for the political leaders responsible/irresponsible for an illegal referendum on that same self-determination. That scenario would be the culmination of a cycle of political unrest that has been growing for a decade, during the course of which the number of Catalans in favour of independence has grown from about 30 % to approximately 45 %.¹⁵

Meanwhile, as the economy continues on an erratic course and the general dissatisfaction in society with politicians increases, the debate about

¹³ Salvati’s political stance is one of a left-leaning liberal; that of Mas-Colell, one of a Catalan sovereignist who focuses on self-determination; my own is one of a Europeanist who focuses on civic friendship.

¹⁴ The first version was written between February and March and the final one, in the middle of the summer.

¹⁵ On the evolution of opinion of the Catalan electorate in these years, see Rodríguez (2017), and Oller, Satorra and Tobeña (2019).

the Catalan problem in the public space becomes increasingly strident, complicated and unpredictable. At the same time, the language employed by both sides is continually misleading: depending on whom one listens to, self-determination is or is not a consultation, the constitutional order is or is not legal certainty, performances at the polls and in parliament are or are not political actions, and could be somewhat analogous to a dream, and the amnesty could be a loosely interpreted as parole, etc.

It seems as if the whole country has settled into a “culture of noise” or fuzziness. It is not that words no longer have complex meanings but that they are ambiguous, true news is confused with fake news, and invective is becoming increasingly frequent. However, depending on the context, all this can be taken more or less seriously, and everyone’s assumptions begin to sound increasingly uncertain. At times it seems that everything gets shaken up but almost nothing happens, budgets are extended and the style of governance slides towards what we could call “the permanently provisional Belgian model” of government.¹⁶ It is hoped that the tension among the public will be offset with the dramatic effects of headline news about the coronavirus, dust-laden winds from the Sahara, an Asian Tsunami, impeachment proceedings, the American presidential campaign or some war or other, not to mention the reverberations of globalisation and future disasters.

And yet, only a month goes by and as *I make a first revision* of this text in the *first week of April, 2020*, the world has been transformed out of all recognition. The coronavirus pandemic has created pandemonium: literally the imaginary capital of an infernal world. The subject that now absorbs almost all public attention is no longer independence but survival. And yet... the Catalan problem still simmers away, and will continue to do so, connected now with new problems of health, the economy and public debate. It is activating feelings of community, hostility, anarchy, confidence, impotence. Not to mention that *over the summer* there is talk of a “constitutional or constituent” crisis, “with or without” a challenge to the monarchy: yet another incident in a series of upsets.

A (Pascalian) bet on “bringing some order”

Against this complex and ever-changing backdrop, the observer is asked to take on the role of participant-observer who has the possibility of “doing something” to understand and, therefore, to bring some order to the Catalan

¹⁶ In Belgium, between 10th June, 2007, and 26th May, 2019 (some twelve years), there were 1,163 days with a caretaker government; in Spain, between 20th November, 2011, and 7th January, 2020 (some eight years) there were 405 days of a caretaker government.

problem. And at this point, we could make a bet on whether this “muddled provisional” situation will continue for some years; or whether it will be cleared up within a very short space of time, one way or another. As for me, on writing this essay, I would bet on an interpretation of the signs that suggests that the muddle will go on for some years.

I make this bet in, we could say, the Pascalian sense (Pascal, 1950 [1659-1661]: fragment 233). If I lose the bet and the problem is resolved fairly soon, and to the satisfaction of the large majority (as occurred with the democratic transition in Spain, for example) then I shall be delighted to have lost (and I shall rectify my prognosis with pleasure). However, this does seem to me to be unlikely, given the nature of the political adversaries, the biases of the élites and the bewilderment of the public; and given that what was a key socio-cultural factor of the transition, namely the “consensus between the two Spains”, seems to be conspicuous by its absence.

If, however, I were to win my bet because “some order” were brought, for a time, then there is hope that, between us all, we could take advantage of this interim period to do things considerably better, one way or another. A range of at least four possibilities come to mind.

First, to carry on doing things in a mediocre but acceptable sort of way. Because, for example, politicians and their followers are accustomed to getting along with each other, having to find compromises and generally keeping the disorder under control. Nevertheless, they gradually discover two things: that they are not so powerful that the world cannot carry on without them, and that they can overcome their resulting sense of impotence by pretending that they do control it.

Second, to carry on in an equally mediocre but rather more eventful way. Politicians are overly tempted to indulge in back-stabbing, and (almost without realising it) they lapse into the old bellicose routines of the left, the centre and the right, all the highs and lows, of the last two centuries. Echoes of accommodating Francoisms may return, those always ready to hold on to the levers and minutiae of power beneath their high-flown declarations of national unity. And echoes may also return of the distortions of *caciquismo* [the corrupt influence of local bosses] and clientelism, and the wheeling and dealing of the many variants of conservative liberalism and populist radicalism, amid (over-acted) scenes of indignation and calls to persecute unfortunate scapegoats. All of which goes hand-in-hand with the consequent degradation of civic conversation.

Third is the possibility of what we might call a more powerful option: one that could, on the one hand, be fatal (as in the case of Icarus, whose wings

melted in the heat of the sun) if it happened on the imaginary stage of a great theatre of the world on which an aggressive strategy of conquests and heroic projects and delusions of grandeur were unleashed. On the other hand, it is an option which could be positive (as in the case of Daedalus, in contrast to Icarus: Pérez-Díaz, 2020), if it happened in a peaceful, energetic and sensible way.

In which case, the fourth and last option emerges: that of committing to bear witness to, and make a statement inspired by, the possibility of, and the normative impulse towards, a political community understood as a *space for civic friendship*. Why not make the attempt, or at least a declaration? In the end, as Salvati reminds us, to be the *vox clamantis in deserto* [the voice crying out in the desert] requires only stubbornness, courage and patience. Although a touch of ingenuity would not come amiss, in the sense, suggested by Baltasar Gracián, of a “consideration of contrariness” (1993 [1642]) that allows us to perceive an obstacle as a potential asset.

If, however, we look for support in the obstacle itself, it is largely because we cannot find a solid enough source of support within ourselves. This brings me to a brief digression on the general subject of what could be called our basic existential insecurity.

1.2. A condition of transient survivors, anxious to endure

In the modern era we are overwhelmed by news but we do not yet know how to control the onslaught. For Hegel, “reading newspapers” had come to be the “modern man’s morning prayers”, which informed him of his place in the world at every moment during its continuous process of change. Perhaps we should, however, reconsider his interpretation (and the exposure to other media) as “the modern man’s daily *hallucination* (morning, noon and night)”. He no longer knows whom to pray to or understands what is happening to him; and finds that any appeal to reason in history or the laws of dialectics is of little use. Because, as Santayana pointed out (1998 [1911]), Hegelian dialectic can be seen as the substitute for a tragicomic history of human experience, which does not provide us with a comprehensible reading of reason in history but only a continuing enigma, full of surprises. Inevitable surprises. Events that were neither predicted nor expected.

But Hegel’s error was not only that of attributing a rational structure to the progression of events but that of extending it to the meaning of the very experience of reading the newspaper. This, to make something clear, is a mixture of his reason and his unreason. The unreason of imagining that the

reception of a combination of, on the one hand, “events” adjusted to fit the interpretative frameworks (which are often banal and manipulative) of the press at any given time and, on the other, of the “exhortations” of leaders and intellectuals, preaching from their pulpits, adorned in their secular vestments –exhortations that can be considered simulacra of prayers– make for a step forwards of reason in history.

In search of an “us”

However, as we have known, and as we have practised since time immemorial, true prayer demands a *relaxed field* (Bellah, 2011): a space in which to develop, with a certain calm and reflection and a moral impulse *sui generis*, an internal dialogue and a dialogue with one’s surroundings and with some form of the ultimate realities. All of which, in their turn, require silence, an ability to listen, and distance from the noise and pressures of public debate and current media outlets.

It is in the experience of that reading/prayer/dialogue where we may try to apply, as best we can, a more or less reasonable interpretative framework to the human history, contingent and surprising, that is brought to us by the news. We apply it by combining reflection and observation with the detail of innumerable fragments of proven, or yet to be proven (scientific or commonsensical) truths. We do all of this (in a more or less conscious way) within the context of some mythico-poetic narrative related to the historical account and the lived experience of ultimate realities, whose religious roots, still clearly visible, have been subject, in recent centuries, to a not entirely successful process of simplification and secularisation.

Today, we probably make this attempt because we are determined to situate ourselves in a process of “totalisation”¹⁷ of which we would be, or we would want to feel ourselves to be, a part. We attempt it by being, or by imagining ourselves as being, part of an “us”, a community that seems to be “us” to a sufficient, congenial, accessible and comprehensible degree. Communities of believers or unbelievers; modern or of their time; of the left, the right or the centre; of one tribe or another.

But, over the centuries, in various parts of the world, we have got entangled in the “us” of political communities, or nation-states. We have done so because we are determined to seek and find in them an “us” of which to become a part and with

¹⁷ Using, out of context, Lukacs’ terms (1960 [1923]), with which he wanted to emphasise the meaning (and the direction) of the revolutionary process for its protagonists as both observers and participants in it.

which to be connected, which provides us with names, both our own and those of things, as well as a means of managing time, and glimpsing an origin and a future. It is also a way of experiencing the landscape, as permanent, and ourselves, as more than merely passing through, mere transient survivors.

It is as if, with these simple heuristics (a world ordered by “nations”) but loaded with connotations as profound as they are confused, apparently easy to understand and taken for granted, the whole (and our place in that whole) is made intelligible and accessible to us (To our understanding? To our influence?). As if, in this way, we acquire a presence and, above all, a potential for agency: personal and collective agency. As if we are capable of taking our own decisions; capable of making ourselves be respected; capable of doing things: as if, in short, we are given a meaning and a direction. It is this meaning to which the *symbolisms* of nation, country, fatherland or motherland – the Russian mother-earth – or simply home and land are continually, inevitably, alluding.

And so it is that, in the midst of the daily, overpowering, hustle and bustle of the public space, with its incessant repetition of news-events, a moment of silence sometimes occurs that enables us to discover that sense of “us”. It is true that this discovery can be disparaged by supposedly rationalist intellectuals of the age as an expression of “emotionalism”. It can also be perceived, however, as a moment of intense emotion and as a kind of miracle by many ordinary people and by not a few of the “enlightened benevolent”; who see it from a more positive attitude of gratitude and inquiry .

Gratitude precisely because, perhaps, that moment, that singular silence, places people in the context of relationships which, even if at first sight may seem a little strange, can help them to build or rebuild the narrative that they need. I am referring to three types of relationships: with the powerful; with “our own”; and with (confused perceptions of) transcendent subjects, which may be, often, quite elusive.

Firstly, it places them at a certain distance from power, from powerful people with whom they find it increasingly difficult to identify. The élites find self-affirmation in modernity; they live in “another world” and attempt to ensure their control over things, but their assertiveness has its downside. Nowadays, at any rate, however charismatic they try to be, and however much they try to guide and care for their citizens, by playing the leadership role, sooner or later they will be obliged to answer to them. Absolute kings (Louis XIV, Frederick II and/or their successors, and many others) have to learn to play the double game of “I am the State” and “I am the first servant of the state”. When they are replaced by parliamentarians, those servants chosen by the electorate (and their party and clientilistic machines), however remote they try to remain, they

soon learn to play the (same) double game, and end up being held to account in the same way.

Secondly, that same “political” moment makes it possible for people to renew their connection with “many” whom they recognise as fellow travellers along a path of frequently confusing experiences: as a people, a society, the masses, classes, human beings... They will identify as “the people in arms”, or “the sacred union” or “together in times of crisis” –a war, a recession, a pandemic– or “a country capable of great achievements”, or possibly “a country that has suffered much and overcome its misfortunes”. Either they will have some such sense of plenitude ... or they will have a sense of “being nothing at all”.

Thirdly, it places us, essentially, in a strange relationship, as characters in search of an author. In search of a story, with its corresponding mythico-poetic language, which does not tend to be the one proposed by the modern story of secularisation, but one that is more complex.

Going a step further (which I feel is necessary in order to do justice to the profundity and importance of a subject which is not merely a question of “pragmatic pacts and compromises, and laws and declarations”) I would say, tentatively, that this is about a language and a story with which to refer to feelings of *involvement in, and belonging to, and in relation with* extraordinary, preternatural or supernatural beings or entities. They look mysterious but inevitable, and central to all, or almost all, social and political experience of which we have ever had evidence. Relationships with entities that seem like dwellers in time and beyond time; in a setting near and far: near-at-hand, and in a distant memory, and in an indefinite future. Entities which we can call political communities, historical projects, homelands or nations or countries, or civilisation, the West, a global village or humanity. They always have religious or crypto-religious connotations.

We should remember that, in spite of those nomenclatures, people continue –we continue– to be unable to identify such entities with any clarity, as if they can only be glimpsed, mentioned, evoked, discerned, questioned. Them, and us. As if they were inconceivable without us, and us, without them. As if they were outside present time: in the past, in the future, in enigmatic symbolisms. We, the individuals of the here and now, bearing the weight of being transient survivors and thus burdened by the nostalgia of *remaining*: remaining bound to reality, through which we move. With the nostalgia of listening and looking, and of being listened to and looked at, always. From our being-there, remaining-there.

That is why we need (and, at heart, are grateful for) that silence, that parenthesis from the continuous noise, to listen and to look at what there is: which is what is-already-there because it has already been done, and done by others. Not something to be invented, but to be found. This includes the extraordinary, the divine, the gods. They are to be found, in fact, through testimonies, rather than invented: found in an Egyptian or Roman polytheistic, or Old Testament, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim way. In a dialogue that is half internal dialogue, half a dialogue of many voices or polyphony. Whereby everything is-is-there, and everything is close by and connected. Gods and men, the heavens and the earth (the *Geviert*, Heidegger's classic fourfold; 1975 [1951]). Being-there in, and through, our encounters with seas and mountains, farmland and woodland; and with other human beings, both similar and different; and with their symbols. And, precisely because of that, encounters with fatherlands, the landscapes of fathers, and with motherlands, the landscapes of mothers, and with nations, the landscapes of those born and those yet to be born, of the coming generations, the guardians / keepers of our memory. And with the protective gods and in their company, silent and absent. Who are present, or present in their absence: because they are missed, they are conjured up, they are reproached, they are feared, they are questioned, their silence is heeded. The reproaches and questions are not a matter of interests or ideas, of data or calculations but a matter of experiences and perceptions, and thoughts combined with sudden emotions and longstanding feelings. Feelings that *with them* we remain, and *without them* we lack, and that each "us" lacks, validity.

It is in that being-there where we, the transient survivors, encounter situations, and complex webs of relationships between beings and things, which seem to come and go, and seem to remain, or could endure; among which the noises and the whispers, and the tactist cunning of politics are no more than epiphenomena. Echoes of things; disturbing experiences of the resistance /reality of things on the part of people who are trying to endure, and remain. Anchored in their necessity to cling to, and to express themselves through, an enduring political community. In search of a political community that will soothe, or seem to soothe, that anxiety: an "us" in the midst of (local, European and/or global) disorder.

An increase in insecurity in times of crisis

Now I suggest we return to the here and now, and specific historical situations such as the complex and shifting current state of affairs in Europe and the chaos in Spain caused by the Catalan problem. This can be viewed from afar as almost anecdotal but, observed from close-up, it is a crucial existential matter (ignoring, for a moment, the contribution of the pandemic, and other current scourges, to the ongoing chaos).

In such circumstances, do the symbolisms of the political community provide us with little more than a confused perception, or do they may provide us with a more clear glimpse of a meaning? Perhaps, and above all, it is the former: a confused perception. We can present a number of (very up-to-date) scenarios of the loss of meaning that occurs when, for example, we have a previous history that is little understood; when we are heading towards a future which, though it intrigues us, is unknown; when the mishandling of an economy is never sorted out; or when the politics that is almost reassuring as it muddles along can become disastrous when it increases in intensity (and strives to assert its teleocratic nature: its being put at the service of a project: Oakeshott, 2000 [1975]). And, more generally, when, in all those fields of human activity, we find a public space in which the upper ranks of a society speak out while the voices of the masses, although often eminently reasonable, are rarely to be heard above a whisper. In such circumstances, no civic conversation can be anything but fragile, and this fragility is virtually inherent in our condition.

I believe that some variant of basic anthropological *humility*, rooted in awareness of the fragility of our public debates, can help us to face this historical moment of uncertainty. It can help us to test the waters of politics and public policies without being too dogmatic, and avoid us becoming so mystified as to be unable to see, for example, what is happening, not with their “reason in history” but for other more modest reasons.

The modest reasons of a Europe, for instance, that has been seventy years in the making, and with no end in sight. And now we have a post-Brexit Europe that makes believe it is free at last to move faster and to be on the brink of catching that train about to leave to the next station, but suspects that the rails have not yet been laid. It cannot decide whether to contemplate its future in good spirits or in a state of constant grumbling. Perhaps because it is missing a past that it has left forgotten somewhere.

Or, going one step further, the dubious reasons of parts of the West, mindful of those of an *America First* (leitmotiv of ex-President Trump), which puts itself forward as a beacon of light to the world, inciting everyone to fight and succeed “so that everyone is first” – a thought-provoking enigma. Because, according to him, one must be first today, but more importantly, tomorrow, and forever more. Even if it means losing one’s direction and decorum along the way. Which brings us back to a debate on how to choose between greater and lesser evils.

Looking closer to home, we have Spain after forty years of transition, consolidation and democratic life. It has been “put to the test” several times with uncertain results (Pérez-Díaz, 1996). Now there is even the hint of returning

to a variant of those violent years of the 1930s, over which the dark shadow of the familiar but always distorted “two Spains” would appear to be hanging. And before that, there were the upheavals of several centuries, with invasion by an (enlightened) foreign power and the (melancholy) loss of her own empire and, before that, the forging of the nation in *La Conquista* [of the Americas] and *La Reconquista* [of Spain from the Moors] at a very slow pace. All of these had their counterpoint in so many luminous experiences, even if only such a faint memory remains of them.

Now there are new populisms protesting on every street corner; the oligarchies are active and busy but without losing their way; and the middle and working classes are living from day to day. Brilliant, restless spirits are constantly innovating, learning to learn what they will soon have to forget in order to learn something else. And a large part of the culture industry (as it tends to be called) is anticipating the eternal moment, triumphal and terrible, of the final deletion of the contents of the most recent computer text,¹⁸ such as the scenes of those who fell from the Twin Towers in New York, plummeting down one after another, unconnected to each other, and to whom will be offered the strange yet moving tribute of a deeper hole and a higher skyscraper. As if, apparently, the idea were to leave mankind without the traditional consolation of a resurrection as Soloviev (1900: 140) might have reminded us.

However, it is time to return to *our here and now* in more detail, and to fine tune our bet by focusing on the current Catalan problem, and offering a more personal testimony.

2. A realistic search for a space for friendship, and the example of Catalonia

In these times of coronavirus, maximum risk and complete ignorance, the pandemic has combined with an extreme economic situation. While the virus and the crisis are threatening our survival, the crude, bad-tempered, political debate is generating increased mistrust, and its effects on social and emotional life are causing confusion. Everything has contributed to increasing a sense of bewilderment, of being confined in a labyrinth and watching, immobile, a shadow dance swirling around us, in an atmosphere of haste, incredulity and shock.

¹⁸ The equivalent of a final deletion of the text in the file.

On the other hand, being almost immobile within a labyrinth may have its positive side. Seneca stated that “those who run in a labyrinth are confused by their very speed” (*Letter XXXVII to Lucilius*). Ergo, we can take a gamble: we can take advantage of being confined and confused in order to reason and not to run while obeying the commands broadcast on the news and the slogans repeated *ad nauseam*. We must avoid the trap of believing that this world of uncertainties will disappear once the current political enemy has been blamed. Let us make use of our circumstances for reasoning through conversation, narrowing down the subject matter, focusing attention, turning difficulty into opportunity and bringing our own experience to bear. And a perfect example of the kind of problems about which we should be reasoning together, right now, is that of Catalonia.

2.1. *An experience of nostalgia, misunderstandings and learning*

A half-century of nostalgias

I am a respectful admirer of the many virtues of the Catalan people, and of a Catalonia that inspires great confidence and which can provide an imperfect (but who could ask for more?) guide to those who are confused. A Catalonia that is a point of reference for its business acumen and negotiating skills, its enjoyment of everyday life, and its long-term vision, pragmatism and sentiment; its *belle époque* detail and great design. It travels afar but remains attached to the land. A Catalonia which is, to a large extent, almost the prototype of a “civil” (as opposed to “uncivil”) civil society, at least in the restricted sense of markets and associative fabric.

Catalonia, tested to its limits during its thousand-year history. Frequently successful. So adept at playing the card of standing aloof as well as that of making a deal. So much to learn from everyone, and everyone from her: especially Spain, which needs the very best of Catalonia, devoted to the freedom and greatness of them both and, if possible, in the best sense of the term, to greatness without conceit.

I remember my first encounter with Catalonia in the 1950s and 1960s. The discovery of Barcelona, taking a stroll down *Las Ramblas*, the sun, the sea and the hospitality. People minding their own business, independent, capable, trustworthy. I remember reading *Els altres catalans* by Francesc Candel (1964) while I was studying the migration from countryside to city, seen as key to the transformation of the Spanish Bonapartist-Francoist, bureaucratic-authoritarian

system by means of a metamorphosis of farm labourers. Learning that these people were not just the “sacks of potatoes” that Marx claimed that they were (without justification) in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, but groups of individuals (whom I was getting to know through my field work: the Castilians, Leonese, Navarrese, Extremadurans, Andalusians) with a far greater capacity for agency. People who could be settled or nomadic. With their own sense of honour; opening up new horizons through their own efforts, without more ado. Those who were becoming, to a substantial degree, a working class of promise.

In the sixties and later, although the horizon is somewhat uncertain, there is a fairly clear logic to the situation that is to lead to Europe (democracy, the market, and a plural associative fabric) from which Spain, at that point, cannot, would not know how to, does not want to, and cannot even imagine deviating from. As for me, in the first half of the 1970s, I am in the United States –a different world– and, on my return, I become immersed in the transition, the theory and experience of civil society, bound up with the emergence of that democratic Spain. It is at this point when, more than ever, Catalonia appears to be crucial.

Crucial not for itself, but for everyone. It is what corresponds to a “Tarradellas moment” which some of us believe could have merged with a “Roca moment” (in around 1984: after Miquel Roca, one of the so-called “Fathers of the Constitution”, of 1978). It is a time when the Catalan segment that is always eager to “conquer Spain” (like Jaime I, known as “*El Conquistador*”) shows signs of making a move to become leaders (at a distance but in a very credible way) of a *Partido Reformista* [Reformist Party] on a national scale. It seems an auspicious moment for a gathering of the “enlightened benevolent” who are sufficiently realistic to go along with and try to persuade ordinary people, full of good sense, towards a promised land of something better than mere tolerance. Towards a noble task and a noble conquest, bound up with a complex, ambitious, enlightened and benevolent project of modernisation.

But just at that moment, at the last moment, the opposite occurs. What has appeared to be an existential decision to lead Spain jointly, in an as yet unspecified direction, turns into a decision to withdraw, to back away. (Which causes understandable consternation among a business community accustomed to the continual growth of its influence in Spain, considered both natural and desirable since time immemorial, and almost always with the tacit or explicit support of nationalist politicians.)

Then, suddenly, three or four decades later, at the turn of a new century, there is a change of direction, an about-turn, a groundswell. What has changed? Is everything to be called into question? Radically? Is no more than a

combination of party political tacticisms enough to show that all that had gone before had been a pipe dream?

Recent misunderstandings

Truth is unconcealed reality (*aletheia*) which emerges when the veil that normally hides it is torn away. Sometimes that veil can be torn away by agreement but, at others, by misunderstanding.

To cut a long story short, I was in Barcelona in July, 2012, after several years of economic crisis and statutory debate, against the background of a political class with little moral authority and an excess of anxiety. I was speaking before a Catalan public who could not have been more enlightened or benevolent. In circumstances that were more than conducive to dialogue between conflicting positions, with cautious respect for established custom in its various forms, keeping differences within certain limits, using rhetoric that varied from somewhat transgressive to fairly moderate. The good manners of people with a keen sense of opportunity, clearly defined interests and including, in the end, the clarity of disagreement because things are the way they are. An open-door occasion?

On my part, I believed that I was on familiar ground. I had a record of academic visits, continuous professional contact, genuine friendships, frequent trips, and positive conversations.

I presented a text that I felt was full of verifiable data, reasoned conclusions and open interpretation, as part of a tradition of academic research over several years. The text emphasised the complexity, and even the ambiguity, of Spanish and Catalan society on the issue of the accommodation of Catalonia within Spain, and underlined a potential for moderation and compromise as regards the dispositions and feelings of ordinary citizens. Complex identities (which many politicians simplify), nuanced arguments about the substance of economic and social policies (which many politicians misrepresent) and (very) favourable attitudes to debating in a civil manner (which many politicians ignore).

All of this would, I imagined, prepare us for a dialogue between opposing points of view that would define contradictions, enable compromises, and overflow with mutual understanding. It was to be enlightenment and benevolence in the style of those men of letters from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, absorbed in the dawning of the best of worlds, perhaps in the knowledge that if things were not as they should be, they soon

would be. How ingenuous. Although –if I may say so, thank God!– I received an impromptu lesson in realism.

Because there I was, up against criticism which caught me unawares and which sounded to me like resounding, radical rejections of dialogue and, in a sense, communication.

Briefly, I had three commentators criticise my presentation. The summary of what they said, or what I understood them to say, is as follows. The first claimed that the survey data I had presented were not correct in the light of other data that contradicted them. The second, that even if the survey data were correct, they were of minor interest because what was important to politics was not in the answers to surveys but in demonstrations on the streets. The third, that even if the data were correct and my analysis fair, they were both ultimately irrelevant because they were inopportune: the time for dialogue was over.

Hence my presentation was irrelevant, ergo, one might think that my presence was also irrelevant, and that the invitation extended to me had been a misunderstanding or perhaps, on my part, a delusion.

I must admit that I felt quite uncomfortable. Perhaps I had expected better from what I understood, in a timeless, almost Homeric, way, to be the Mediterranean rules of hospitality. Just the little things one remembers from childhood – “*ah, cuando yo era niño soñaba con los héroes de la Iliada!*” [ah, when I was a child I would dream of the heroes of the Iliad!] as Antonio Machado said (in *Proverbios y Cantares, XVIII*). Dreaming of heroes who were rivals but brothers-in-arms. Childhood memories that set the imagination on fire and opened up an array of possibilities (Gopnik, 2009), and dreams. The little things with a hint of innocence, and a hint of the wisdom of the poets.

I have to say, however, that, over time and on mature reflection, my attitude has changed appreciably. I certainly do not reject the emphasis on dialogue and complexity. Even less do I renounce childhood or the poetry; but I fear that they are not enough. I have to recognise that those three criticisms were, in fact, highly instructive. I am very grateful for them as they taught me things that I would not have learned without them.

The criticisms seemed unjust at the time because they did not, in my opinion, take sufficient account of what I was saying, nor of what I meant –the intention of my words– nor their content. They did, however, broaden the context and the course of the discussion and hence they had a rational and emotional component from which to learn. It is “the advantage of unjust criticism” that it can be useful and, though unjust, its usefulness makes it less so.

Possible lessons

We can benefit from criticism to begin a learning process which, to give it a name, I would call one of the objects of analysis, the ambiguous rejections, the mutual misunderstandings and fluid realities, and the reasons for caution and hope.

The first lesson is that if we do not manage to become partners in dialogue with others, because we lack the empathy necessary to understand what they say and what they mean (Davidson's Principle of Charity), we can at least become aware of this failing. We can develop the talent to turn an impossible dialogue into an opportunity for understanding others as objects of analysis and, incidentally, self-analysis.

Once we have achieved a certain distance from ourselves, thanks in part to no longer expecting too much from the dialogue nor expecting it too soon (and yet without allowing our curiosity to flag) we are able to realise that those others draw attention to interesting topics; and, consequently, take advantage of their reasoning in order to enrich our own.

In my own case, this has led me to conclude that I should have anticipated, and understood, the outright rejection, from the start, of my "good advice". I should have imagined that what was, for me, to some extent, a theoretical and, basically, remote question was, seen at first hand, an existential matter that was far more dramatic and closer to home. It was as if their rejection were telling me: "This man has no idea of where he is or what we are like or how we feel about this matter. Well, he's going to find out." And something else: "He hasn't even realised how much things have changed in recent years, or how far our feelings of rejection to the indifference with which we believe we are seen from Madrid have come. Rejection of that chronic neglect of what, or of what we are convinced, is of supreme importance, going round and round in circles about a subject that affects us so much. And, that being the case, it should be enough for anyone who is paying attention." (In inverted commas, a scene imagined by the author.)

From the above, a second lesson can be deduced. Namely, that the rejection (or reproach) may contain a positive and stimulating cognitive and emotional component. Also that it should be treated as an ambiguous phenomenon: as well as rejection, there is also an invitation to a struggle for recognition from which perhaps a greater mutual understanding may blossom. An understanding, for example, that part of what is happening is that we are facing people who demand more attention to their condition as active and responsible subjects.

A third lesson would be to understand that, in the heat of debate, we usually witness both sides losing sight of the other's vision or, in other words, of undervaluing each other's reality. As a result, mutual misunderstandings can cascade, each one reinforcing the next, and causing an atmosphere of growing confusion.

For example, those against independence may not realise how strong the feelings and symbolisms of the (two million) Catalans in favour of it are; neither do the latter, in turn, recognise the strength of the feelings and symbolisms of those who identify themselves as Spaniards and constitutionalists in Catalonia (also about two million, not to mention the rest of Spain). At the same time, many of those non-separatists may still feel, in some way, *els altres catalans* [the other Catalans], belonging to a society subordinated, to all intents and purposes, to the hegemonic society that controls the economy, social life and culture, which is made up of Catalans of Catalan ancestry and whose mother tongue is Catalan. On the other hand, it is obvious that this social hegemony is limited by the state institutions, and that those conflicting feelings tend to change as the result of their combination with interests of all kinds.

In short, although both sides in the debate are realities who are resistant and jealous of their identities, they are also complex and fluid realities. And being fluid, somewhat messy: always defying clarification. All the more so because the two sides live, and co-exist, in a cross-dialogue with each other and among themselves. It is not easy to know what they identify with; and it seems to be proven that many have some form of dual identity (Spanish and Catalan, not to mention European).

At this point, it is time to take the next step, the fourth lesson, and introduce some caution and a reason for hope.

I shall begin with a reminder of the teachings of a millennial cultural tradition about experiences of good and evil, peace and war, love and hate. These tell us that, in the current political drama, ambivalent relationships are as likely to espouse enmity as friendship (without excluding the possibility of people opting for a prolonged state of bipolarity or schizophrenia). The result, one way or the other, depends heavily on whether people allow themselves to be guided by their common sense and their better moral feelings or whether they allow themselves to get carried away by a desire to exploit, dominate, humiliate and indoctrinate others. Essentially, it is that simple. In this regard, observers of society in the seventeenth century tended to be more pessimistic than those of the eighteenth. In view of our experiences in the twentieth century, perhaps we should consider that it remains an open question.

As regards caution, we should be understanding but not “overly understanding”. The most sensible thing would be to be “understanding, realistic and reasonable”: in the manner of those who proceed step by step, alert to the context and the positions of all those involved, and who understand that this game is for the long-term, and that the stages follow one another as part of a process. In the end, (although there is *no* definitive end), it is a question of understanding why people of any “here and now” are not more understanding, why they are so obstinate and confused, why they are distrustful and reject so much, so often, and so intensely. Also why, at some point, the mere repetition of “dialogue, dialogue” can be counterproductive and even come to sound false. And we must remain alert in order to distinguish between true friendships (actions speak louder than words) and false friendships (just empty words).

As regards hope, it is the very fact of having it that pushes people forwards. And with hope may come a new direction, and the impetus to follow a path away from the terrain of attacks and accusations (of “tyrants”, “victimisers”, “supremacists”, etc.) towards an intelligent dialogue that allows us to face up to the numerous substantive problems, including the crisis, the pandemic and others, of today. The more serious and urgent they are, the more they require sound judgement.

A forbearing and lucid dialogue of this nature, if it were to succeed, (if “the fates favour us”, as the ancients used to say – today we usually talk of “trends”) could become a habit. It could provide a space for mutual respect and cooperation which would, in its turn, bring us closer to a model of civic community. Whether it be called Europe, or Spain, or Catalonia or all three at the same time is immaterial. Without forgetting that true friendship is not the result of a pact or a project. We bring it into existence. And it comes freely when it wants to come, or never comes at all.

2.2. Alert to foci of distortion, and in praise of the unusual

The creation of, and care for, a space for friendship requires continual effort, which includes handling unjust criticism and attacks of one kind or another, as well as cultivating a certain kind of idealism. Tame the tiger, and set your sights high. Converse, contain distortion, and dream of agreements.

Conversation is not generally an easy task. The conversation (frequently) implicit in the markets is not (Pérez-Díaz, 2009), and neither is one about religious differences. It is no easier in the sphere of politics where, only too often, debate obscures more than it illuminates, and divides more than it unites. All the more

so when it is dominated by the presence not of the enlightened benevolent but of voluntarists with a propensity for misrepresentation and mental confusion, in various different ways such as those of magical hyperrealism, fuzzy symbolisms, and a belief in the omnipotence of ideas.¹⁹

Broadly speaking, this problem tends to occur across a spectrum of politicians, economic and social élites and intellectuals and the media. The frequency of these practices has a good deal to do with the relative importance of agonistic tendencies within the institutional systems in which they operate: capitalism, multi-party democracy, the fabric of interest groups. To simplify, we could say that a section of the traditional bourgeoisie live their lives (with a measure of enlightened benevolence) while protecting their interests in the belief that, whatever happens, one way or another, nothing will happen to them and they will not really suffer. These privileged people follow politics in a way similar to that of past generations who might go to Paris to see *boulevard* theatre. This is politics disguised as theatre: out on stage for the general public but with far more going on behind the scenes for the initiated. In accordance with which, they are quite sincere, including when they are not being so entirely, and justification can be found for almost everything: with perhaps just the hint of a mixture of sceptical freethinkers and the clericalism of the pro forma confession and mild penitence.

And we should remember (without wishing to over-generalise) that we may find that their rebellious offspring are no more than the mimetic rivals of their parents. Opposed but alike. Just like the *soi-disant* post-modern revolutionaries, prone to moulding their discourse according to circumstance, trying to transmute their impotence into omnipotence, and deciding that things are, in fact, as they are written in the script or the plot of the latest farce or tragicomedy, with their propensity to assert themselves and without losing sight of their advantage.

This being so, quite a few politicians can get used to implying that they are the architects of the continuous creation of the world and that, with their assertions, they make things happen: unemployment goes down, the economy grows, solidarity is achieved, and external threats are magicked away. In contrast, with their opponents, everything goes wrong. They think that they are like the gods, whose every word created and recreated the world. If they were to remain silent, the sun would cease to rise. They tend to transform politics into a melodrama peppered with comic, triumphant or heart-rending arias, of varying quality, sometimes even followed by well-deserved applause.

¹⁹ On the application of magical hyperrealism to the Spanish social and political scene, and on blurred symbolisms, see Pérez-Díaz (1996; 2008).

In general, the role of politicians that usually prevails in one of these melodramas is as warlords. In fact, since time immemorial, the language of politics has almost always tended to be one of domination and war by other means. Many politicians aspire to being recognised as “political animals” –little better than predators– better feared (up close) than loved (from afar). In contrast, we find abundance evidence from ordinary people, in their response to surveys, highlighting the fact that, although they do, in effect, see politicians as belligerent, they see themselves as far more pacific. A single detail: when asked in a survey in 2012, 72.1 % of Catalans and 71.9 % of Spaniards overall thought that, “in relation to the controversies over autonomies, nationalisms etc. in Spain... the majority of people would tend to reach agreements, but political leaders tend to promote conflict” (Pérez-Díaz, Mezo and Rodríguez, 2012).²⁰

Lastly, we often find a circle of intellectuals and their adherents, crucial to the configuration, and distortion, of the public space, who are protagonists or participants in the media and academia. They tend to divide their time between searching for the truth and acting as worthy proponents for the political and socioeconomic élites, putting words (figures, exclamation marks and stories) into the mouths of one side or the other; sometimes but not always accurately. Even if they just have bit parts to play, they are restless spirits who seek, and usually find, their fifteen minutes of fame.

It is therefore true that, to the extent that certain patterns of distortion have prevailed, public debate over the last few years has become somewhat harsh; but not so much so that it makes us forget the rational component contained within this debate (and this nuance is very important). It is a debate that, in my own case, with the comparative harshness of the three rejections, tells me and tells us that a simple statement of the facts is not enough because we need an interpretative framework that makes sense of those facts – and continues to gather them, interspersed with words, *sine die*. It is very important to understand people as agents, and not merely as respondents to surveys nor (I should add) as voters who drop their papers in the ballot box.

The practicalities of preventing a dialogue from becoming a dialogue of the deaf is a difficult issue. It is not enough to invoke and repeat the mantra

²⁰ This is congruent with other data about (mixed) feelings of belonging and preferences for different (graded) variants of autonomy, which facilitate compromises; as well as about the nature of (serious) historical failure and the (high) risk of internal dissent which separation would bring about (which entails anticipating the high costs of the conflict); and, finally, about the probability of separation from Spain (not very likely, perhaps the effects of wishful thinking and/or the expectation of the victory of inertia and/or a kind of last-minute caution or restraint: it's anyone's guess).

of “dialogue, dialogue” because real dialogue comes and goes like a bird on the wing, and to seize it requires determination. And because, even when managing the public space from a distance, it still remains to add the context of better understanding, deeper empathy, a pause to reflect on outside criticism, a search for common sentiments, a longer narrative, greater patience, a space for friendship, and a more comprehensive “us”. And, moreover, to understand that the phenomenon of distortion of the public space is the result of a combination of systemic distortion, projects and strategies: a systemic distortion bound up with different strategies of domination, exploitation and humiliation.

In praise of the unusual, and an unexpected but not impossible friendship

However, to this must be added the possibility of a positive stimulus from the space for friendship; and one that is not so far-removed from one’s own experience. In my case, for example, I should have remembered in time (and I failed to do so due to an error of judgement of which I was not fully conscious at the time) what had happened to me thirty years earlier. Back in the 1980s, at the height of what I have called “the Roca moment”, I wrote an article for *Diario 16* (1984) developing the idea that Catalonia, free and capable, found itself facing a range of options, among which were self-absorption, separation or a primary role in Spain; and how possible and how desirable it was that it should choose to take a leading role in Spanish life and politics: all of which would be compatible with its differentiated identity, with its European identity, and with its global vocation. This article received a quite complimentary review from a writer, Ramón Barnils (1984), which (I understood) almost made an example of me to some of the *Catalanistas* [those supporting independence] because I had come to believe in the options open to Catalonia more than they seemed to believe in them themselves. As a result, being seen as pro-Catalan among wary Spaniards and even, to some extent, almost as more Catalanist than the *Catalanistas*, feeling unsure of themselves, I had become, in his eyes, someone unusual (*insólito*). Nevertheless, my reviewer chastised and criticised me for a lack of realism that, in his eyes, had led me to ignore the “minor details” of the pressure, which he believed to be overwhelming, from “*la Constitució als estatuts passant pel DNI, la Benemèrita, tres segles de submissió... i tota la panòplia estatal, administrativa i fàctica d’Espanya.*” [from the Constitution to the statutes, including the ID card, the Civil Guard, three centuries of submission... to the whole state panoply, administrative and factual, of Spain.]

To which I now respond, with some delay I fear, that although I do accept his kind – or perhaps less-than-kind – irony, I would emphasise that I still consider myself, even if only for the sake of argument, as unusual or unaccustomed at

least in one sense: that of breaking the habit of continuing to aspire to that famous tolerance (Ortega y Gasset, 1973 [1932]) that, stripped of its aura of early nostalgia, and now in the form of formal agreements and recurring noise, has become increasingly inadequate for what is at stake: the risk of rupture and the chaos that would ensue, leaving a spiral of mutual distrust in its wake.

On balance, there are a number of possible scenarios. To start with, it is absurd to try to conceal the risk of separation. Firstly, because the balance of power, which appears to suggest a stable equilibrium, is not in fact equal because there is no parity of sentiment or desire between the adversaries and, at present, one side seems more mobilised than the other.²¹ Secondly, because, if the level of mistrust is high, the continuous swings in feeling could cause ill-considered consequences: such as the spread of the problem to other autonomous regions, an unending stream of insults and reproaches, a series of law suits and disclosures in the public arena, and a search for culprits and scapegoats who will be, preferably, defenceless, and starting with those who are closest.

At the same time, however, there are reasons to cherish hopes based, ultimately, on that existential insecurity which I mentioned at the beginning, connected to the need for understanding and mutual assistance in difficult times. These are reasons based on our ability to understand and to learn and, in this sense, to overcome, for example, the short-sightedness of the political parties and their voters, in general, towards the problem of Catalonia over the last fifty years. And likewise, in our ability to cultivate those good feelings of helping each other, starting with reciprocal listening and respect for the elements that differentiate us all as well as for the common features, thanks to which we have reached the point we are at with relative freedom, prosperity and civil peace. Otherwise, we would have completely lost our way some time ago – and not for want of trying. With common sense and a sense of what we have in common, and a somewhat broader vision, the possibility exists of building and rebuilding a space for friendship in Catalonia, in the whole of Spain and across the whole of Europe – and, in particular, a space for friendship *between* Catalonia and the rest of Spain. A space for reciprocal loyalty and commitment that could and should be the objective which marks the long-term direction of this historical experience of ours that has been underway for so many centuries

Lastly, and balancing aspiration with realism, it is worth noting that the likelihood of achieving this objective is about fifty-fifty. It is unlikely if there is a lack of substantial support from the influential social sectors that I referred to

²¹ This is how it is perceived by those seeking independence who are in favour of immediate and resolute action, such as, for example, Quim Torra, who see themselves running “the last hundred metres” (Torra, 2016).

above. That being so, in order that they give that support, it is not only necessary that they should want to do so but, above all, that ordinary people understand this, that they mobilise and that they demand it. And further, it is necessary that these efforts, by everyone, come accompanied not by a string of exhortations to dialogue but by a narrative that explains the desirability of the ultimate objective as well as its *plausibility*. A narrative that deals with the resources, the obstacles, the alliances and the details of implementation; without losing sight of the other simultaneous games. A narrative that leaves the way open for a coming-and-going between a pragmatic friendship, “of vested interests”, that does not amount to much, and a “true” friendship that aims higher.

As far as I am concerned, I insist in my suggestion – and as I have included personal testimony of my own in my discussion, I must admit that this insistence may have something to do with the memory of my grandfather, who came from Calatayud, and the impression that perhaps the Aragonese have a role to play in these agreements and disagreements... I insist as much in spite of those rejections as because of them, on making a bid for this unusual objective. Unusual because it is unfamiliar and unexpected, though as unexpected not impossible. Just like friendship.

We seek friendship motivated by that basic insecurity of transient survivors to which I referred at the beginning, modulated by the historical conditions of each case. Because our entry into this world and the way in which we live and survive in it is by co-existing, aware of being surrounded by basic care, and by giving and receiving. Together with this comes, from infancy, our innate curiosity for that *haecceity* of the mediaeval philosophers, that differentiated individuality; for the differential act, for what is different. This is what usually encourages us to relate to those who are not our equals, in the broadest sense, *precisely* because they are not; thus avoiding the boredom of repetition of what we already know about only too well. We travel, we emigrate, we read, we find each other, avoid each other, lose and miss each other. In an eternal search.

Friendship and curiosity are to be seen in all the chess games of political life. And all the more so when these are long-term games or win-win games that involve a reiteration of deals and treaties, and recurring alliances. But friendship requires time. The time for it to develop and be tested. And all the more so right now, in a time of pandemic: as a test of survival.

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