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Ideas and Their Destinies: Enlightenment, Communism, Europe¹

1. Introduction: Europe as an ambivalent idea

As the project of European integration entered a series of crises in the last decade, historical and conceptual reconstructions of the idea of Europe have been consulted anew, either as the legacy of principles and values that can be referred to in the quest for solutions or to demonstrate how the current problems are manifestations of an original flaw. The idea of Europe can be seen as “a promise of peace, prosperity and freedom,” as the French President Macron recently put it,² but this promise can be understood either as the deeper meaning behind the common market (as Macron himself would have it) or an ideological veil masking the neoliberal policies that make Europe an instrument in the hands of financial capital (as many critics have claimed).³ Europe as an idea is often presented as a vault of fundamental values coming from Athens, Jerusalem, and/or the Enlightenment, but these values can also be understood as more recent inventions deployed for dubious causes from the Crusades⁴ to austerity.⁵

On the one hand, the progressive goals behind the idea of Europe have been reaffirmed to guide Europe as a political project in crisis out of its predicament. To use a famous phrase coined by Jürgen Habermas – who is also one of the most outspoken advocates of this position –, Europe is thus presented as an unfinished project. On the other hand, the project of Europe is subjected to a

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¹ This article is a result of the research project J6–8264 “Europe as a Philosophical Idea and Political Subject” and the research programme P6–0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary philosophy”, which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

² Emmanuel Macron, “For European renewal”, 4 March 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal.en>.

³ See Cédric Durand (ed.), *En finir avec l'Europe*, La fabrique, Paris 2016.

⁴ See Tomaž Mastnak, *Evropa: med evolucijo in evtanazijo*, Studia humanitatis, Ljubljana 1998, and *id.*, “Abbé de Saint-Pierre: European Union and the Turk”, *History of Political Thought* 19 (4/1998), pp. 570–598.

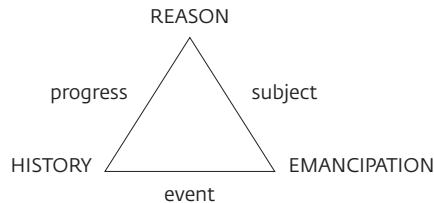
⁵ See Costas Lapavitsas et al., *Crisis in the Eurozone*, Verso, London and New York 2012.

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radical critique that goes all the way to the origins of its most noble ideals of universalism and cosmopolitanism and their strong entanglement with imperialist and colonialist endeavours. From this perspective, to have any hope of salvaging Europe and its idea, one must be prepared to declare – as Étienne Balibar, among others, has done⁶ – that the project is “finished” in its current form and has to be reinvented on new foundations.

In any case, there is an ambivalence to the idea of Europe.⁷ Simply put, it seems either that there is always something wrong with Europe even though the idea is essentially good, or that there is something to salvage in the idea even though its origins and realisations are deeply suspect. In these terms, Europe as an idea would perhaps be better accounted for in terms of its destiny rather than its legacy – that is, if we ascribe destiny the meaning assigned to it by Freud in relation to the drives: as different possible outcomes resulting from a process made unstable by internal polarities and ambivalences. I will thus attempt to analyse Europe from the perspective of its ambivalent structure as a political idea.

What I mean here by political ideas are not the general principles of justice, liberty, equality, and the like, but more specific and historically situated conceptual structures that suggest a particular relation between (1) an assumption of political reason, (2) a particular outlook on history and its continuity as the medium in which reason gradually manifests itself as progress, and (3) a certain conception of emancipation in which reason is directly and fully subjectivised and which implies an eventual rupture with historical continuity. This conceptual structure is represented by the following figure.



⁶ See Étienne Balibar, *Europe: crise et fin?*, Le bord de l'eau, Lormont 2016.

⁷ I am borrowing this characterisation from Gerard Delanty, for whom the ambivalence of the idea of Europe is revealed in the way in which, “on the one hand, an exclusivist notion of Europe has prevailed; yet, on the other the idea of Europe does appear to occupy the normative space for a universalist project of autonomy.” (Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1995, p. 12.)

This triad, as I will try to show, remains inherently ambivalent due to the friction between the continuity of progress and the discontinuity of subjectivation. In a crisis – when it turns out that there is ultimately no subject of progress, the different possible destinies of political ideas start to unfold: on the one hand, ideas succumb to the logic of the unfinished project that desubjectifies progress and reduces the hopes of political reason to reforming institutions and launching new narratives. On the other hand, radical critique questions the very core of the idea and the progress it is supposed to bring forward, while anticipating the emergence of an emancipatory political subject.

I will first demonstrate this logic with regard to two other political ideas of this kind with which Europe is in a specific constellation, namely enlightenment as it figures in Kant’s “Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” and communism as described recently by Alain Badiou in his text “The Idea of Communism”.⁸ Kant defined enlightenment as emancipation through the subjectivation of reason. Having the courage to use one’s own reason without guidance from another is in itself an act of emancipation, but also an indication of the historical course of progress that can only be achieved gradually. As it turns out, the emancipation of the immature from their guardians is not (only) an act of courage but (also) a fragile process that requires its own “enlightened” guardians. While Kant struggles with the inclusion of the emancipatory event in his narrative of progress, Badiou attempts to come to terms with some kind of continuity of emancipatory sequences. If the political truth to which communism gave rise only exists in limited temporal sequences of subjectivation initiated by events as radical discontinuities in the course of history, what guidance can communism as an idea provide at a time when no proper political sequences seem to be active?

While European integration is today more often than not understood in continuity with the political principles of the Enlightenment (reason, progress, democracy, cosmopolitanism, etc.), it is also a project established in opposition to communism as an alternative form of progressive internationalism. Just as Europe gains some of its legitimacy from its opposition to communism, which is now generally identified with its “dark side”, it must turn a blind eye to-

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970, pp. 54–60. Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism”, in: C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, Verso, London and New York 2010, pp. 1–14.

wards the “dark side” of enlightened progress as exposed by many critics since Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁹ It is no coincidence that Habermas established his conception of modernity as an unfinished project by criticising Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightenment as going too far and therefore ignoring its progressive legacy.¹⁰ Not only are enlightenment and communism two political ideas that intimately intersect with the idea of Europe, they also offer two other cases of divergent destinies of political ideas. They can therefore help us clarify the point of differentiation between various accounts and discursive uses of the idea of Europe itself.

2. The event and the narrative: from Kant’s enlightenment to its contemporary guardians

Can it be said that Kant presents enlightenment as an idea? The word “idea” certainly does not figure in his “Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” (December 1784), in contrast to another text that Kant published in the same journal, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, just a month earlier, namely the “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” (November 1784). Foucault famously argues that Kant’s answer to the question of enlightenment is significantly different from his other texts addressing the problem of history since the questions of the teleology and accomplishment of history are not directly addressed. What comes forward in this particular text in a crucial way is rather the question of the present, “‘today’ as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task.”¹¹ In the November article, on the contrary, the idea from the title takes precisely the role of the teleological development of history: the “at first sight absurd proposition to write a *history* according to an idea of how world events must develop if they are to conform to certain rational ends.”¹² In this context, enlightenment figures not as “the present”, but as the admittedly often interrupted process that leads from the beginning to the end of history, i.e. from the natural rational capacities of mankind to their full development in

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⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. by F. Lawrence, Polity Press, Cambridge 1987, pp. 106–130.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. by S. Lotringer, trans. by L. Hochroth and C. Porter, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2007, p. 105.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, p. 51.

“a universal cosmopolitan existence,” the world order of “a federation of peoples.”¹³ While the December text presents the Enlightenment as an actual event in the present that the philosopher commits to, the November text presents it as an idea, as “only a notion of what a philosophical mind (...) might be able to attempt” in terms of looking at the course of history “from a different angle.”¹⁴

The idea is something that presents itself as a narrative, “a *novel*,” as Kant himself is ready to admit.¹⁵ And yet we are invited to assume that what is thus presented is the actual course of history as we are usually unable to see it due to the empirical history, which provides many arguments against the assumption of progress. If we want to show that such an idea is not a mere fancy, it needs to be subjected to a reality test that will show “whether experience can discover anything to indicate a purposeful natural process of this kind.” Kant will famously return to this question after the French Revolution, but in 1784 the test only discovers “a little” of this process in actual experience.¹⁶ The idea of progress thus remains a hypothesis, an attempt of the mind. Its credibility stems less from the signs one might observe in experience than from its value as a perspective on history that provides guidance, as well as comfort and motivation for action. The cosmopolitan idea does not, however, provide us with ideological goggles that would explain everything we see as a necessary step towards the common good. It rather helps us not to be discouraged by defeats of progressive ideals, since it enables us to see that despite the setbacks, “a germ of enlightenment always survived, developing further with each revolution.”¹⁷

On the other hand, Kant opens his text on enlightenment by defining this germ itself as a revolutionary motto addressed to everyone: exiting the state of immaturity by having the courage to use one’s own understanding without guidance from another. The problem of historical teleology is put aside for a moment, as Foucault notices, in order to identify “a certain element of the present that needs to be recognised.”¹⁸ The Enlightenment is an event, something that the philosopher identifies as determining the present by issuing a call to form a col-

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 84.

lective subject, an “us” to which the philosopher declares he belongs.¹⁹ That is why Foucault sees this text as an outline for “the attitude of modernity,” actively affirming “the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy.”²⁰ In terms of the structure of the political idea outlined above, Kant therefore moves from the line of progress (between reason and history), to the line of the subject (between reason and emancipation). *Sapere aude!* is precisely the call to subjectivise reason, gaining the courage to use one’s own, which amounts to an exit from immaturity, i.e. emancipation.

Despite his emphasis on the opening paragraphs of Kant’s text and the specific reading he offers,²¹ Foucault nevertheless does not shy away from giving an account of the rest of the text, which manages to “displace and, up to a point, contradict or call into question the whole of Kant’s analysis.”²² The problem appears at the point where Kant draws our attention to the difficulty each individual has working “his way out of the immaturity which has become almost second nature to him.”²³ The rational natural capacity of men is here contradicted by the second nature that the guardians of the immature take great care to reproduce. But in order to be able to renounce the guardians and autonomously constitute themselves as the subjects of their own understanding, the immature need another kind of guardian, the enlightened avant-garde that will be able to “disseminate the spirit” of enlightenment.²⁴ Here, the problem of progress returns. As we have seen already, there is no inevitability to progress in Kant. It is an interrupted process that only advances under specific historical conditions and is put to a halt in the absence thereof. Its continuity can only be asserted from the perspective of providence, which – as merely human – “we are not capable of placing ourselves in.”²⁵ Here, Kant argues against progress through revolution and opts instead for a long-term evolutionary vision of the public use of reason as the gentle climate

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 112.

²¹ Foucault thus also discerns and affirms a fragmentary element of Kant’s text as its specific “event”.

²² Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*, trans. by G. Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2010, p. 39.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, p. 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. by M. J. Gregor, Abaris Books, New York 1979, p. 149.

in which the germ of enlightenment will eventually mature.²⁶ The freedom of public reasoning (on the condition of obedience) was at that time guaranteed by Frederick, the enlightened monarch.²⁷ Thus, “after having stated and demonstrated at some length that there cannot be an individual agent or individual agents of this liberation,” Foucault argues, Kant “now introduces precisely the King of Prussia,” king Frederick, as the true “agent of *Aufklärung*.”²⁸

What becomes clear here is what Jacques Rancière will describe as “the logic of Enlightenment in which the cultivated elites have to guide the ignorant and superstitious lower classes in the path of progress,” a path “of infinite reproduction of inequality in the name of the promise of equality.”²⁹ Foucault himself, having identified the difficulties of Kant’s text on enlightenment after declaring its singularity as the advent of philosophical modernity, seeks to nevertheless keep hold of this singularity by connecting the question of *Aufklärung* to something that will be able to make up for its shortcomings. The manuscript published as “What is Enlightenment?” links it to the attitude of modernity through Baudelaire, yet Foucault’s original take on the subject, the first lecture of his 1983 Collège de France seminar, keeps the problem in the Kantian frame by linking *Aufklärung* to the French Revolution as addressed by Kant in “The Conflict of Faculties” (1798). In this text, the question of progress and the question of the event are merged: there is something about the Revolution that has meanwhile taken place that answers Kant’s old question of the proof of progress given by experience: “In the 1798 text, the revolutionary enthusiasm replaces or succeeds the King of Prussia in the role he was given in the 1784 text as [an] agent of *Aufklärung*.”³⁰

While in his November 1784 text the progress of humankind remains an idea, an attempt of the mind to produce a *possible* narrative of which only “a little” was given in experience, the 1798 text introduces an event as the definitive sign that the progress is *real*. As Foucault notices: “the assignment of a cause [the natural capacity or moral tendency of mankind] will never be able to determine anything except possible effects [...]; but the reality of an effect can only be

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, pp. 55, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp. 37–38.

²⁹ Jacques Rancière, “Communists Without Communism?,” in: C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, pp. 167–168.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p. 39.

established by the existence of an event.”³¹ Finally, there is an event that grounds the fiction of progress in actual experience. But what is the nature of this experience? Kant first warns that “the problem of progress is not to be resolved directly through experience” since it would take an uncritical climb up to the position of providence to see all the facts as regular historical movement.³² Nevertheless, Kant continues, there must be an experience that can be seen as the undeniable sign of the cause of progress, a certain character of humankind.³³ It is not an empirical fact that can play this role, it is an event or, more accurately, the effects of an event that can prove this moral tendency, namely, the enthusiasm of the observers of the French Revolution. Their participation in desire (“*eine Theilnehmung dem Wunsche nach*”) proves a certain “moral predisposition in the human race” as the cause of progress.³⁴ Leaving aside the debates this affective politics has given rise to amongst thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Jean-François Lyotard, we will only keep in mind here that Kant’s emphasis on the affective effects of the Revolution allows him to separate the question of the sign of progress from the empirical consequences of the Revolution. Just as the sign Kant is looking for is not given as an empirical fact but as an event, so too are the empirical successes and failures of the Revolution irrelevant from the perspective of progress. The event in itself is enough since for Kant, as we have seen, progress is essentially an interrupted process and no delay or step backwards can be an argument against assuming that it is real.

Finding proof that the narrative of the idea is real, Kant reconciles the fissure between progress and event that I identified between the two 1784 texts. On the one hand, event is a sign of progress, while on the other, it issues an affective call for subjectivation (participation in desire). The point where the triangle of the idea nevertheless remains incomplete, however, is the connection between progress and subjectivity: we have determined that the improvement of the human race has a cause, but it only advances in subjective sequences whose effects can be easily reversed. As there is no (human) subjectivity that can guarantee the continuity of improvement, “the hope for [...] progress is to be expected only on the condition of a wisdom from above (which bears the name of Providence if it is in-

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 88.

³² Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, p. 149.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

visible to us).”³⁵ Indeed, providence (or the enlightened State as its worldly incarnation) can be seen from this perspective as the fantasy that provides the illusion of the continuity of progress in the absence of any subject that could guarantee it.

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Following in the footsteps of Adorno and Horkheimer, many in the second part of the 20th century have criticised the effects of progress as the legacy of the Enlightenment – not in the vein of anti-Enlightenment reaction but in the name of its own ideals. The idea of enlightenment, however, is currently making a major comeback. In one form or another, calls for the urgency of a return to enlightenment from different sides of the political spectrum are proliferating. The main motivation for what is still essentially a Habermasian defence of its legacy is a response to the dangers of a turn towards a “post-truth” society. Reason is thus reaffirmed as the centrist liberal democratic common sense opposing the rise of populism.

One should nevertheless keep in mind Foucault’s reservations regarding such reaffirmations of enlightenment. His reading of Kant’s text in 1983 was already a reaction to Habermas’s critique not only of Adorno and Horkheimer’s book, but also of Foucault himself and other French theorists who were accused by the German philosopher of diverting critical theory away from reason. Foucault responds, as we have seen, with his own reaffirmation of enlightenment that goes in a different direction, while he dismisses the guardians of its legacy in the following way: “Let us leave to their pious meditations those who want to keep the heritage of the *Aufklärung* alive and intact. This piety, of course, is the most touching of all treasons.”³⁶

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Since Habermas, paradoxically, the reaffirmation of enlightenment has often boiled down to rejecting critical theory that goes too far and undermines reason itself.³⁷ “Postmodernism” became the most often used tag for this kind of erratic

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, p. 93.

³⁷ According to Habermas, we should be careful not to take partial solutions as a part of the problem: we should instead carefully separate the political, scientific, and artistic achievements of reason that have already “been incorporated (in however distorted and incomplete a fashion) into institutions” that govern modern democratic societies from the

critical theory that analyses the way reason can function as a tool of oppression and domination. A return to reason as a reaction to so-called postmodernism thus makes a return to enlightenment an attractive prospect for those on the left who want to leave postmodern deviations behind,³⁸ but also for those on the right who reaffirm reason as the liberation of “controversial” facts and ideas from the censorship of political correctness.

An example of the latter kind can be found in Steven Pinker’s bestseller *Enlightenment Now*. In an astonishing twist to the Kantian problem of confirming the idea of progress in experience, Pinker sets out to prove with extensive empirical data how humanity has indeed progressed remarkably in all aspects of social life since the 18th century. As progress becomes a fact, critics such as Adorno and Foucault can only be seen as “the prophets of doom,” spreading illusory pessimism.³⁹ As some critics have noticed, such arguments provide a seemingly centrist platform that serves to legitimate some more controversial ideas of the radical right.⁴⁰ Pinker’s heroic humanity thus reminds us of the patient Kant jokes about in his own discussion of progress, the patient “dying of improvement.”⁴¹

It therefore seems that turning enlightenment into a legacy to be defended amounts to replacing the call for the subjectivation of reason with reason in the form of the Kantian providence in secular disguise: progress guaranteed by the parliament or simply the market.

problems that still remain to be solved. (Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 113.)

³⁸ See Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim, “Aliens, Antisemitism, and Academia” and “Dialectical Enlightenment”, *Jacobin*, 11 March and 16 May 2017, www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/jason-reza-jorjani-stony-brook-alt-right-arktos-continental-philosophy-modernity-enlightenment and www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/radical-enlightenment-philosophy-spinoza-materialism-marxism.

³⁹ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Viking, New York 2018, pp. 39–40.

⁴⁰ See James A. Smith, “Steven Pinker and Jordan Peterson: The Missing Link Between Neoliberalism and the Radical Right”, *Open Democracy*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.open-democracy.net/en/steven-pinker-jordan-peterson-neoliberalism-radical-right/>.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, p. 169.

3. Connecting (to) the sequences: communism with(out) history?

Just as it is widespread today to resort to the legacy of the Enlightenment, it is commonplace to simply identify the idea of communism with the dark side of communism as a political project, up to the point where its “legacy” seems irretrievable to most. Nevertheless, the idea of communism has recently gained traction in philosophical circles, particularly since the discussions surrounding Alain Badiou’s reconceptualisation in 2009.

Badiou’s take on the idea of communism is of particular interest to us here since he describes it primarily as an “idea” with a defined structure made of different elements, but also as an “operation” that entails certain functions and processes. For Badiou, the idea delineates a triangle (similar to the one we have laid out above) connecting “three basic elements: a truth procedure, a belonging to history, and an individual subjectivation.”⁴² Badiou describes truth as an element of the idea as “a concrete, time-specific sequence in which a new thought and practice of collective emancipation arise, exist and eventually disappear.”⁴³ This is consistent with the way Badiou has described truth procedures since 1989’s *Being and Event*: as sequences, initiated by an event, in which a (collective) subject is constituted as the agent that thinks and acts in order to transform a particular situation in line with the consequences of the event in question.⁴⁴ We can immediately see how (political) truth, event and subject have been indistinguishable elements of Badiou’s philosophical framework for decades.

Badiou’s conception of truth thus already includes subjectivation (the third element of the idea). The question that needs to be raised in this context is what do we gain by reframing truth procedures in terms of “the idea”. The answer is history (the second element), which previously had no place in Badiou’s theorisation of truth. Without the inclusion of history, Badiou was happy to insist on what we could call in this context the materialism of the subject. This is opposite to what the defenders of the legacy of enlightenment strive for: there

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⁴² Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism”, p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by O. Feltham, Continuum, London and New York 2005.

is no progress and history, there are only events (discontinuities) that initiate subjectivations of a truth in emancipatory sequences of thinking and acting. Truths may arise from singular events, but they are nonetheless universal in their emancipatory dimension. But they give no sense or narrative to history, no continuity of a progressive legacy – and this is why, Badiou reminds us, he “many times had to insist that History does not exist.”⁴⁵

There are two reasons why Badiou nevertheless upgrades the materialism of the subject with the idea of communism (which, in fairness, is also “a materialism of the idea”⁴⁶); two reasons that also seem to imply two different meanings or functions of the idea. On the one hand, the idea is an extension of the universal aspect of singular truths. A truth is not only universal in its singularity; it is also eternal in its temporally limited sequence. It is thus a “projection” from a temporal point *within* a subjective sequence to other times within “the alleged totality of human becoming.”⁴⁷ There is still nothing “real” about history for Badiou. Only the truth can be real, while history is a symbolic construction, itself a result of subjective projection. In this sense, an idea “is the imaginary operation whereby an individual subjectivation projects a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narrative of a History.”⁴⁸ It is thus an internal aspect of the process of subjectivation.

Yet the projection to eternity is also what enables the “transtemporal availability of truths.”⁴⁹ Via the idea, truths are available outside the subjective sequences, in the “ordinary history,” where there is no event and people are disoriented.⁵⁰ In our time, dominated by the ideology of “democratic materialism,” where no ideas are supposed to subjectivise us, the idea helps us to anticipate “the event to come.”⁵¹ This is the other sense of the idea for Badiou, one that is not strictly speaking a correlate of the subject, active within a sequence, but a

⁴⁵ Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism”, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. by L. Burchill, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden 2011, p. 56. See also Rado Riha, “Sur le matérialisme de l’Idée”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 30 (2/2009), pp. 227–245.

⁴⁷ Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism”, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

guiding light to human animals anticipating the possibility of subjectivation, a foot in the door that keeps open the very “possibility of possibilities”⁵² against the ideology of “no alternative”.

The idea as something that enables the human animal to orient itself towards the possibility of subjectivation relies on the symbolic narrative of history projected from the actual subjective sequences of truths. That is how the “evental communism”⁵³ of Badiou, which articulates eternity to the contingency of events, nevertheless establishes a historical narrative, thereby completing the triad that makes communism a political idea. The question that needs to be answered at this point is how this type of narrative compares to the narrative of progress established by the guardians of enlightenment. The usual anti-Hegelian trope against teleology does not quite cut it since – as we have seen – this is a Kantian narrative that does not rely on an overall meaning of history that would direct progress with any kind of necessity. The progress in question is an unfinished project – it is not teleology but continuity that is at stake.

Applying the same narrative structure of the unfinished project to the idea of communism would of course be seen as more obviously problematic for a variety of reasons, but there is also a question mark over its bare possibility – is there still a project out there that one could simply continue with? It is not simply interrupted and therefore unfinished, but must emerge (if at all) every time as a new, singular sequence. If history (as the history of the communist idea – as what makes communism an idea) nevertheless exists, it should not be a narrative establishing a factual and institutional continuity at the price of excluding the event, it should rather be the discontinuous connection between events themselves, a “network of ephemeral sequences,” as Badiou himself phrases it.⁵⁴

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With a different kind of narrative also comes a different kind of guidance. The “orientation” that the idea provides should not fall into the trap of the reproduction of inequality inherent – as emphasised by Rancière – in the way the Enlightened guardians lead the ignorant on the path of progress. That is why,

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵³ Jelica Šumič Riha, “Komunizem med smrtjo in vstajenjem”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 30 (3/2009), p. 79.

⁵⁴ Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism”, p. 10.

for Rancière, “emancipation means the communism of intelligence, enacted in the demonstration of the capacity of the ‘incapable,’” i.e. the capacity of the immature to learn by themselves.⁵⁵ Only after taking this into account can history be articulated with the event without tipping the triangle of the idea towards the pitfalls of progress. Such moments of the verification of equality are the ultimate moments of emancipation that any “history” of communism should connect: “If something has to be reconstructed under the name of communism, it is a form of temporality singularizing the connection of those moments.”⁵⁶

4. Europe: an idea without a subject?

While the project of European integration now provides a clear objective reference to the idea of Europe, its subjectivity remains unclear. Can Europe – beyond its critical legacy and its progressive achievements – become a name associated with an emancipatory political sequence? Badiou’s own reaffirmation of “the idea” was aimed at countering “democratic materialism”, which recognises only the existence of bodies and languages, but not of (emancipatory political) truths. In a similar way, the idea of Europe could be said to remain confined to only institutions and narratives. Institutions and narratives, however, do not make a subject; rather, they trace a path of progress that risks reproducing the immaturity of those who refuse to follow. Are those who refuse Europe now the only ones capable of addressing Europe in a process of political subjectivation (as reactionary or obscure as it may be⁵⁷)?

In 1999 Balibar noted that Europe appears first of all as “the name of an *unresolved political problem*.”⁵⁸ Twenty years later this is indeed the case as calls for more or less Europe, exiting or reforming Europe, proliferate. On the one hand, the guardians of the European legacy can be very critical towards the practices of European institutions in the face of crisis, but are ready to defend the ideals

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⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, “Communists Without Communism?”, p. 168.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵⁷ I am referring here to Badiou’s categorisation of different types of subjects in Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds, Being and Event 2*, trans. by A. Toscano, Continuum, London and New York 2009, pp. 45–79.

⁵⁸ Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. by J. Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2004, p. 2.

for which Europe provides a localised historical body, e.g. peace, prosperity, and freedom for Macron, or cosmopolitanism for Habermas or Ulrich Beck.⁵⁹ On the other hand, critical discourses present these ideals as part of the problem in (at least) three ways: the idea of European integration itself emerged as a way to exclude the other (primarily as a response to the threat of Islam);⁶⁰ European cosmopolitanism cannot be separated from its imperialism and colonialism;⁶¹ and its ideals are but an appendix to the actual project of integration, which has proven to be merely an instrument of capitalist exploitation.⁶²

We are thus faced again with the primary ambivalence of progress itself, the “unfinished project” and its “dark side”. The conflicting sentiments of moderate progressives towards Europe in the cases of Grexit and Brexit are a case in point. It is this ambivalence that is clearly demonstrated once again by Habermas, who was a starch critic of Merkel and the EU’s stance on Greece at the height of the economic crisis,⁶³ but endorsed Macron in the aftermath of Brexit as the idea of Europe’s own King of Prussia.⁶⁴ They might disagree on the solutions, but what Habermas, Merkel, and Macron share is an “enlightened” vision of Europe as an unfinished project. It is this vision, I would like to argue, that prolongs the logic of enlightenment as criticised by Rancière. Along with the guardians of the idea, the ignorant masses that vote for the wrong options or demonstrate against the wrong things are also recreated. These are the manifestations of the current form of grand narratives, whose essence, according to Rancière, is to reproduce “the difference between those who live within the

⁵⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Europe”, *Journal of Democracy*, 14 (4/2003), pp. 86–100. Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, *Cosmopolitan Europe*, trans. by C. Cronin, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden 2007.

⁶⁰ See footnote 4.

⁶¹ See Gurinder K. Bhambra, “Whither Europe? Postcolonial versus Neocolonial Cosmopolitanism”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 18 (2/2016), pp. 187–202.

⁶² See footnotes 3 and 5.

⁶³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, trans. by C. Cronin, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden 2012, p. 52.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “How Much Will the Germans Have to Pay? What Macron Means for Europe”, *Der Spiegel*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/juergen-habermas-on-the-european-vision-of-emmanuel-macron-a-1174721.html>.

time of knowledge that renders justice and those who live within the guilty time of ignorance.”⁶⁵

If we accept the position of radical critique instead of the position of the unfinished project, is the European idea “finished,” as some have suggested, or can it be considered as something “present” in Foucauldian terms, a banner under which the attitude of modernity can still be exercised? Or, going back to Marx, is the enlightened idea of Europe confined to remaining one of the solutions philosophers keep in their drawers while the uninitiated world awaits them with open mouth, or can it be a part of the new world discovered through the ruthless criticism of the old?⁶⁶

One of the manoeuvres that enable such a critical reappropriation of Europe is to make the critique itself a crucial part of the European legacy that one is supposed to resort to. An attempt at reconciling the logic of the unfinished project with a slightly more radical form of critical theory has recently been proposed by Gerard Delanty, who turns the conflict of interpretations surrounding the idea of Europe into the very content and positive legacy of this idea.⁶⁷ Europe cannot be appropriated as a system of common values and turned into a grand narrative to be completed. On the other hand, however, rejections of Europe on account of its dark side fail to recognise “the critical and post-universalistic strand within European culture over the past 200 years.”⁶⁸ In his 1995 book *Inventing Europe*, Delanty set out to “dispel the myth of Europe as a unifying and universalising project,” showing how “the European idea emerged and was

⁶⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Modern Times: Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics*, Multimedialni institut, Zagreb 2017, p. 30.

⁶⁶ See Karl Marx, “Letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843”, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm.

⁶⁷ Gerard Delanty, *Formations of European Modernity: A Historical and Political Sociology of Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013, pp. 300–301.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 290. A more radical version of this position can be found in Slavoj Žižek: “Against this ‘end of ideology’ politics, one should insist on the potential of democratic politicization as the true European legacy from ancient Greece onwards. Will Europe be able to invent a new model of repoliticization questioning the undisputed reign of global capital? Only such a repoliticization of our predicament can break the vicious cycle of liberal globalization destined to engender the most regressive forms of fundamentalist hatred.” (Slavoj Žižek, “For a Leftist Appropriation of the European Legacy”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 3 (1/1998), pp. 63–78.)

sustained more by conflict and division than by consensus and peace.”⁶⁹ Tied to a more contemporary political reality, however, the idea of Europe becomes “a more contested discourse and open to new visions of political community.”⁷⁰ Thus, Delanty has recently made a case in defence of Europe, hoping for the emergence of “a new narrative” that would reinvent “the cosmopolitan current in the European past in order to find a model of solidarity with which Europe can come to terms with its own cultural and political diversity.”⁷¹

Delanty’s hopes can be said to resonate with the ones expressed by President Barroso’s famous farewell speech calling for a new narrative for Europe.⁷² Such a narrative, Delanty claims, would have to take into account that “there is in fact no underlying European self or constitutive subject,” which means that Europe cannot be the name of an essentialist, foundational grand narrative.⁷³ But perhaps the lack of a subject, while welcome in its non-essentialist function, is also the problem, if such new narratives cannot become part of a process of an emancipatory political subjectivation.

If the subject of the European idea cannot be found among the institutions and narratives, then it can only be found among the people – but what is “the people”? Following Rancière once again, “the people” do not exist; what exists are “diverse or even antagonistic figures of the people, figures constructed by privileging certain modes of assembling, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities.”⁷⁴ Today, European institutions and narratives are fighting against the spectre of populism, which is another way of constructing the progressive divide between the guardians and the immature.⁷⁵ Neither can the

⁶⁹ Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe*, p. vii.

⁷⁰ Gerard Delanty, *Formations of European Modernity*, p. 305.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁷² José Manuel Durão Barroso, “A New Narrative for Europe”, 23 April 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-357_en.htm.

⁷³ Gerard Delanty, *Formations of European Modernity*, p. 301.

⁷⁴ Jacques Rancière, “The Populism that Is Not to Be Found”, in: Alain Badiou et al., *What is a People?*, trans. by J. Gladding, Columbia University Press, New York and Chichester 2016, p. 102.

⁷⁵ As Rancière has stated in a recent interview, “the term ‘populist’ is something that our rulers use to say that they are in the know whereas the rest of us are imbeciles.” (Jacques Rancière, “Europe: The Return of the People, or of Populism?”, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2896-europe-the-return-of-the-people-or-of-populism>.)

people as subject be found in the European cosmopolitan ideal: “Europe, the international community, the citizenry of the world, and, finally, humanity – all so many names for a whole that is equal to the sum of its elements, each having the common property of the whole.”⁷⁶ The problem is that this ideal has no subject, if political subjectivation – according to Rancière – appears precisely at the site where the part with no part, the part that has no place within the supposedly common whole, is at stake.⁷⁷

Is there nevertheless an affirmative figure of the people that can form the subjective basis of the European idea – a “we, the people of Europe” as anticipated by Balibar? For Balibar as well, there is no *demos* of Europe on which its democratic legitimacy could be based. Such a *demos* is something that can only emerge and exist within a specific process: “The *demos* does not exist before democracy as its condition: it emerges within it as its continuous effect. Yet democracy itself does not exist outside the course and different forms of the practices of democratisation.”⁷⁸ In his response to Habermas, Balibar claims that the juridical arguments for reforming European institutions such that parliamentary representation plays a bigger role are not sufficient to democratise Europe. Formalist representative democracy has to be supplemented by “material democratic inventions” in terms of participatory, but also conflictual modalities of democracy.⁷⁹ Balibar subjects the European ideals to a materialist reversal: “democratic work requires *determinate matter* and not just an ethics and juridical norms” and can only “come from the specific way politics is traversed by conflicts” in specific situations.⁸⁰ For Balibar, these situations are especially related to work and borders – precisely the conflictual sites that are also the breeding ground of what tends to be swept under the rug of “populism”.

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The European construction will paradoxically only regain its legitimacy according to Balibar if it is radically questioned in the processes of democratisation in which “Europe becomes the stake and the frame of social conflicts

⁷⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by J. Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1999, p. 125.

⁷⁷ “Wherever the part of those who have no part is inscribed, however fragile and fleeting these inscriptions may be, a sphere of appearance of the *demos* is created.” (*Ibid.*, p. 88.)

⁷⁸ Étienne Balibar, *Europe: crise et fin?*, p. 186.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?*, p. 173.

[...] that concern its very future.”⁸¹ Along these lines, we can conclude that the “destiny” of the idea of Europe will be decided less by the way we build on its legacy as an unfinished project than by the ways it will feature as a stake in “the present” of emerging political subjectivations.

⁸¹ Étienne Balibar, *Europe: crise et fin?*, p. 115 (see also p. 201).