SCOTTISH STUDIES INTERNATIONAL 43

Klaus Peter Müller (ed.)

Scotland and Arbroath 1320 – 2020

700 Years of Fighting for Freedom, Sovereignty, and Independence

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700 years of people in Scotland, England, Europe, and the world fighting for freedom, sovereignty, independence and justice are investigated in the essential periods and cultures since the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath: the Middle Ages, the Reformation and Early Modern Age, the English Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Cultural, media, political, and social studies, history, the law, art, philosophy, and literature are used for an analysis of the evolution of human rights, democracy, freedom, individual as well as national independence and justice in connection with past and present threats to them. Threats from politics, the economy, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, people's ignorance.

The Editor

Klaus Peter Müller was the Chair of English at Mainz University (retired in 2018), focusing on British and media studies, literary and media translation, still investigating the links between these fields, narration, our understanding of reality and history, and the cognitive sciences.

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Contents

Edouard Gaudot (Paris/Brussels)

Utopia in an Age of Apocalypse: A Reflection on the Politics of Europe and Ecology

Abstract: *The nature of our times makes it highly difficult for politics to come forth with a mobilising project. Hence we do find ourselves trapped by the strong resurgence of the old narratives of nation and growth, fuelled by the anxieties of globalisation. This calls for an urgent reorientation of our political polarities, a renewed ‘utopia’. Europe could provide this – only if we resist the traditional temptation to make it the ‘end of history’ and for this connect it with ecology.*

Keywords: History; Arbroath; EU; apocalypse; utopia; politics; ecology; narrative; nation; globalisation; growth; economy; hope; illusion myths; truth; power; culture; freedom; independence; sovereignty; motivation; Bruno; Latour; Brexit

“Hope […] it is the quintessential human delusion, simultaneously the source of your greatest strength, and your greatest weakness.” (The Architect to Neo in *Matrix reloaded*, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros. Pictures 2003)

“Wer dachte dass die Zeit für große Erzählungen vorbei sei hat sich verirrt. […] Das Elend der großen Erzählungen herkömmlicher Machart liegt keineswegs darin, dass sie zu groß sondern darin, dass sie nicht groß genug waren.” (Sloterdijk 2005)

0. Apocalypse is not what we think. Mostly reduced to one of its spectacularly destructive episodes, the battle of Armageddon, it has actually not that much to do with the ‘End of the world’. Apocalypsis, as its English translation recalls, is actually revelation. And more literally: unveiling. It is the end of the illusion, the moment when truth is revealed and visible for all. In the presence of God almighty, there is no turning around – or as Plato would put it, truth is compelling. Thus Apocalypse is however an end: the end of history.

When it appeared in our modern political vocabulary, thanks to Thomas More, Utopia was in fact a place that does not exist, where perfection reigns. Since then, its function has been two-pronged: it serves as a denunciation of ‘what-is’, i.e. the current situation, and it offers a situation

one should strive for, an ideal to be pursued. It thus provides individuals and communities with a purpose: the advent of ‘what-ought-to-be’. It is a mover, an engine to history – with the clear horizon of reaching the end of it.

In a sense, both apocalypse and utopia deal with the end of history. One by stalling our free-will in the contemplation of the truth bringing a millennium of peace and prosperity, the other by offering such perfection that no change is desirable. Thus both bring politics to an end. One immediately, the other at the end of the story.

The assumption behind this article is that our current times are apocalyptic. The mechanisms of power, be it political, economic, cultural etc., are increasingly unveiled – and questioned. So are the dimensions of freedom, independence, and sovereignty. This becomes evident through the work of fiction, whose interest for politics has fed a steadily growing production of movies, TV, and literature. This is also shown in the flourishing satirist and entertainment sectors. Or the continuous flow of information, whether verified or forged. Finally, the inflation and circulation of conspiracy theories is an additional sure sign that we have entered an era of revelations about politics, power, and their foundations.

Our current times are disenchanted. Through historical experience, this growing awareness about the mechanisms and connections, the intentions and deceits in politics etc., the underground currents and the waves of strong emotions – all this knowledge that can at times be overwhelming, to the point of claiming that “ignorance is bliss”.[1] Or at least, that illusion is preferable to reality.

Utopia is a motivation tale. A call for action in times of uncertainties. A call for politics. But when we think power corrupts, institutions disempower, profit rules while the poor suffer and the planet dies, then politics looks doomed. This article is a reflection on hope – the prime mover of man and the very fuel of politics. What happens to utopias in a time of revelations? What will move us citizens, individually and collectively if we’re too disenchanted to believe in the stories about bringing an end to history?

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1 As Cypher, the *Matrix* character, confesses in the scene of his betrayal in *Matrix*, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros. Pictures 1999.

1. This summer took me at the very end of Europe’s *finis terra*. Walking the coastline of Celtic Spain is a fine delight. In Vigo and the surrounding islands, it meant having the pleasure to enjoy wildish landscapes, rough natural environment, and naturally amazing food (although a bit animal-centred, thus quite hard to negotiate for a rather vegetarian diet). Later, strolling the streets of the cultural capital, the famous pilgrimage city of Santiago de Compostella, I found myself caught in the boisterous atmosphere of the Galician national day. There in the midst of a cheerful crowd, I stumbled upon the political demonstrations, speeches and activist gatherings taking place. In these celebrations of local pride and identity, the most vocal and expressive were by far the *Bloque Nacionalista Galego*. There I could witness again directly the strength and power of the national idea, in a much more genuinely peaceful expression, though, than the explosive situation has reached over the last years in Catalonia.

The presence of my companion, a staunch Ciudadanos member strongly committed to Spanish unity, amongst other issues, all but reinforced the contrast of this identity dispute. Her dismissive reactions to this display of regional nationalism reminded me, if need be, how Spain remains deeply divided and polarised around these questions. Some months later, this is once more highlighted by the violent protest following a rather abusive jail sentence imposed on the handful of Catalan politicians who had organised the self-determination referendum on 1 October 2017. A referendum that met with strong support from Scotland.

Once an empire turned modern middle power, rocked by two decades of sustained yet unsustainable growth, plagued by rampant political corruption and the difficulty to come to terms with its authoritarian past, Spain appears relatively devoid of a mobilising political project. There, as in a majority of the EU member states, the European integration project offered some illusion of an encompassing narrative. But the European promises of eternal prosperity did not survive the crash of the 2008 financial and economic crisis and the skyrocketing figures of unemployment. A stranded youth, a stalled political system, a persistent difficulty to find its place in the current European order, and yet what has stirred most efficiently the crowds in Spain?

It had been individual freedom in the 80s *Movida*. It was *democracia real* in the 2010s *Indignados*. It could be climate change, or fighting inequalities.

Most preferably both. But no – these issues, when they are considered, are mostly synthetized in the old encapsulating narrative of the ‘nation’. Whether affecting a centralised nationalistic government or its regional counterparts, demanding an equally centralised state-like autonomy, these bursts of national fever showcase the everlasting mobilising power of the ‘national question’. And recall that it is not confined to the right-wing populist political forces or the governments of Viktor Orban and his Central European fellows.

2. Regardless of any political inclination for either side, the Spanish national ordeal may take an odd colour to French eyes. From the first kings to the Gaullist saga, through the great 1789 Revolution replacing the will of the King by the will of the Nation, France has pioneered a historical construct of gradual, sometimes brutal, political and administrative integration – ‘*e pluribus unum*’ for real, literally making one entity from so many peoples. As stated in its last Constitution, ‘*une et individisible*’, the Republic’s political culture is deeply marked by the same kind of centralisation that is now in jeopardy beyond the Pyrenees – perhaps a common legacy of the Bourbon’s absolutist monarchy. However, on this side of the mountains, it’s not the unity of the state that is threatened. But that of the people.

Secularism, or rather what the French call ‘*laïcité*’, has moved from a practical doctrine of State and Church separation coined in 1905 against the Catholics’ political and cultural influence in the public sphere and in opposition to the Republic. A century later, it has now become the ambivalent assertion of French identity. Grappling with its post-colonial heritage, and shaken by three decades of rising inequalities, increasing awkwardness towards cultural differences and a series of gruesome Islamist terrorist attacks, France is deeply torn between its universalistic claim to be the homeland of human rights and the increasingly difficult acceptation of its Muslim component and any extra-European migrants. Time and again, French Muslims find themselves entangled in nation-wide, media-fuelled, outraged polemics on the headscarf, the place of religion in the city, conflicting values and heritage, and the supposed incompatibility between Islam and democracy or the Republic. The national question, spearheaded by a bold established extreme-right political force called the ‘National Rally’ (formerly ‘Front’), is central again.

While the country of Enlightenment is struggling to sharpen the edge of reason, somewhere, in another context and beyond the shores of the continent, the tsunami of identity politics and nationalist rhetoric have engulfed Britain’s public sphere – to the point of drowning the very foundations of the self-proclaimed oldest parliamentary democracy. The story of the “uncivil war” over the country’s membership of the EU quickly departed from the complex if concrete EU issues, to become a volatile and violent matter of British identity, nostalgia for fantasised epic times, mock imperial jingoism, and sheer immigrant rejection.[2] Consequently, the claim for Scottish self-determination is all but over, as the prospect of the UK falling out the EU, perhaps without even a decent Brexit deal, is reviving the flame of independence which had been somewhat blown out with the 2014 lost referendum.

Many shades of national narratives, some positive some much more damaging, but all fuelled by the same idea: take back control from whatever is preventing us, individually and collectively, to be what we once were, or aspire to be.

3. Obviously, for anyone who might have thought otherwise, the reckoning is inevitable: the ‘age of the nation’ is far from being over. For all the outcries of the European federalists, the liberal post-material thinkers and transnational green activists, this powerful narrative born twin to the modern state and propagated as a direct effect of the French revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath is still very much present. And coming in various flavours. Far from having been rolled back by increased material wealth, globalisation, or the European integration process, identities and their national expressions have been exacerbated.

Who am I? “*Who are we?*” as Samuel Huntington (2004) asked in his controversial book about the threatening effect of Spanish immigration into the US. These existential questions at the core of every individual and community have been political issues throughout the two past centuries. But the globalisation process has deepened their cut by weakening the ground on which the answers so far had been rooted: the certainties

2 The expression is from the excellent movie *Brexit: the Uncivil War*, dir. Toby Haines, House production 2019. For a synthesis, check Shafak 2019 on the rising violence in British politics.

of the industrial society. It is actually quite revealing to compare how the same question asked by Huntington in 2004 had been put by Robert Reich (1991) in the *Work of Nations*, chapter 21 “Who is US?” was the question echoing his concern about the effect of globalisation on the domestic organisation of work, and the waning structure of industrial politics.

Post-industrial politics shall not be so benign, expected political sciences professor Huntington (1974) some 45 years ago. Trying to assess the consequences of the mutation from mass-driven industrial societies to the more individual and sociology-driven ones we now find ourselves in, he foreboded the emergence of identity politics – whose first seeds were already sprouting in the US. And he announced it would strongly disrupt the public debate in both shape and intensity. The fact that Huntington evolved himself from a socio-economic framework of thought towards the one which brought him fame, the cultural approach where identities are defined by rough civilizational blocks, is in itself a powerful demonstration of the paradigm shift.

Indeed, “one of the outstanding mental effects of globalisation is the fact that it has made the greatest anthropological improbability – constantly taking into account the distant other the invisible rival, the stranger to one’s container – the norm” (Sloterdijk 2013). This seminal remark by Peter Sloterdijk could be interpreted as the positive sign of an emerging planetary consciousness, a kind of worldwide *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*. But it also recalls the added layer of confusion and disorientation that globalisation has bestowed on the condition of individuals.

It perhaps also brings down to earth Blaise Pascal’s anxiety, who was shivering at the contemplation of “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces”. Maybe today the noise of a very finite world frightens us, but the feeling is comparable. A number of citizens are feeling disoriented, dwarfed, purposeless.

4. This renewed ‘discontents with civilisation’ is not exactly a novelty, though, as the eponymous book by Freud in 1930 explored how much the expansion of one’s horizon triggered by civilisation was triggering a sentiment of loss in purpose and identity that no technology nor wealth could pretend to compensate. But the whole point of this quick and partial psycho-political detour was to recall some of the dynamics that make today’s politics more than ever a matter of identity.

It would seem strange that building a nation, or defending a national identity, or actually any kind of identity, would surpass the great challenges and very real threats that we will have to face anyway. It seems odd that the compelling truths about the state of our planet, the degradation of the very conditions of life in our home world, the lasting plague of hunger, poverty and gaping inequalities, would be of less effect on our collective mobilisations than the national narrative. And yet this is still the case for a large part of the developed world’s population.

Because eventually, it’s all about finding purpose. And hope. ‘Suffering, pain, disorientation, loss of references, fears, anger, hate’ are amongst the words used to explain the motivations of the growing French extreme-right electorate. Strangely, however, none of the observers, commentators and politicians seem to consider that one dominant emotion in the choice to vote for a neo-fascist party like the RN could be a positive one: hope. Hope, this powerful resource of political commitment. This driver, this faith that can carry mountains. And this faith – and hope – that voting can still change something in the world and one’s condition.

“Our Generation has had no Great war, no Great Depression. Our war is spiritual. Our depression is our lives.” This powerful quote is from Chuck Palahniuk’s masterpiece *Fight Club* (1996), superbly embodied by Brad Pitt in David Fincher’s 1999 movie based on the novel. A story of political uprising, against the comfort civilisation and its decadent bourgeois materialism. *Fight Club* tells the story of the birth of a fascistic movement as a response to the dominant complacent lack of purpose.

Its success and quality is an invitation to meditate on the historical beginnings of fascism, at the time when it was only the rough doctrine of an average socialist journalist from Milan, disappointed and frustrated by the misgivings and impotence of its national political system, unable to earn the due respect for its contribution to the 1918 final victory. We would remember then the revolutionary inspiration, the strong wind in the sail of radical transformation, the will to go forward, faster, stronger, and finish off with a despised establishment. In the beginning was Hope (at least a kind of), as Italian fascism presented itself as the only political force able to take down the ruling bourgeoisie and its detested social order, without replacing it with proletarian dictatorship. A revolution without disorder. Change without pain.

The rise of fascistic and/or radical right-wing populist movements on our European political scenes and beyond equates to a brutal kick into the post-materialist comfortable house of leaves where we have dwelled so far, in denial of the idealistic and oneiric dimension of politics. This dream might well seem more like a nightmare to some of us, filled with xenophobic and racist sound and fury, repugnant impulses and destructive anger. Indeed. But this is not about being morally right. The FN voters and their European AfD, Lega, Jobbik, Demokraten, VOX et alii fellows might have chosen the wrong anger. They have obviously chosen the wrong enemy. But they are definitely not wrong on this point: one is always right to hope.

5. The progress made by the French Rassemblement National can no longer be attributed to mere circumstances. It has become rooted, structurally and even culturally. Its strength is not just a result of the weakness of the system or mere opposition to the recklessness of the technocrats currently ruling. Rather its strength comes from having succeeded in capturing one of the founding myths of modern France: the alliance between social and national, between those who looked up to the nation to bring welfare and pride and those who favoured a social republic for the same goals. A founding myth which was at the core of the Resistance programme for government.

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on”: with this quote from Shakespeare’s *Tempest* the Austrian poet Hofmannsthal lamented the lacking sense of community stemming from the absence of a national idea in fin-de-siècle Vienna (cf. Schorske 1979). A founding myth and utopia share a common feature: they make you dream. They are a desirable horizon, either set in the past or the future. They mobilise.

But today’s political sphere fails to harness the power of imagination. The professional politicians, the engineers, the magistrates and the lawyers who govern our countries have forgotten the meaning of dreams, the evocative power of legends and the mobilizing capacity of great human adventures; instead they have allowed spin-doctors turn them into mundane story-telling. However, imagination is what provides the stuff of historical epics, drives crowds to rise, feeds hope and allows people to triumph collectively over adversity. It is imagination which gives meaning to political action. And thus, by transforming the coalition of ‘losers’ of recent French

history (monarchists, anti-Semites, Catholic fundamentalists, ultra-liberals and hard-line conservatives who decades ago fought the rehabilitation of Captain Dreyfus and in more recent times have tried to ‘liquidate’ the legacy of the 1968 movement) gathered by her father into a vast popular movement of resistance to globalisation, Europe, Islam and to the political system itself, Marine Le Pen has managed to channel the increasingly vocal indignation of a growing part of the French population. Stephane Hessel (2010), the great Resistant who died a few years ago, has mercifully been spared the cruel irony of seeing the ideals of the Resistance, which he offered as a model for the awakening of a people’s movement, being carried by those who historically would have hunted him down. Indignation and outrage have changed sides.

The RN’s national dream may well be a nightmare for those who see the world as a horizon to be discovered, rather than an inexhaustible source of threats and fears. But for the rest, its tune is as thrilling and magical as that of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Like a unisex Viagra of European politics, the radical right parties make the disenfranchised, who feel that they have been rendered impotent, believe that they will once more be able to get a grip on their lives. Instead of the bland but brutal platitudes delivered by de-politicised managers and technocrats from both Right and Left, who reject the very idea that there might be an alternative to their recurrent errors, the European radical right and neo-fascist paradoxically speak of freedom.

6. Too many liberals seem to have forgotten the very root of their name. That they once carried a utopia with them. That freedom and nation were the same flag. They have tended to forget that freedom is surely not automatically guaranteed by liberalism. And that democracy is not a given, but a sociological process, a system of belief that requires faith, and loyalty. For what happens when “God fails the believers”? This is the question raised by Ivan Krastev together with Stephen Holmes (2019), as they retrace such a dramatic fall:

> In the first years after 1989, liberalism was generally associated with the ideals of individual opportunity, freedom to move and to travel, unpunished dissent, access to justice and government responsiveness to public demands. By 2010, the central and eastern European versions of liberalism had been indelibly tainted by two decades of rising social inequality, pervasive corruption and the morally

> arbitrary redistribution of public property into the hands of small number of people. The economic crisis of 2008 had bred a deep distrust of business elites and the casino capitalism that, writ large, almost destroyed the world financial order. Liberalism's reputation in the region never recovered from 2008.

This echoes many of his conclusions in the brilliant book Krastev published early 2018, *After Europe?* (cf. also Gaudot 2018). With the evolutions of the last decade, pioneered by the radical right in Central and Eastern European countries, the very nature of democracy has changed: it is no longer a tool for the inclusion and protection of the minority. In other words, the democratic pact that guarantees losers will not find their heads on pikes, or exiled while their property is pillaged and their family massacred, is under threat. As Krastev explains: “Demand for real victory is a key element in the appeal of the populist parties.” If these movements are reactionary, it's in their belief that they are a majority bullied by the minority. When, for example, the Polish foreign minister declares in his first few days in office that it is time to break with the “new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians” you would really wonder which government he is referring to.

‘Threatened majorities’ are making their voices heard and bringing the Trumps, Kaczynskis, Salvinis and Straches of this world to power. They are taking democracy and voting back to its origins in the Roman Republic: a violent confrontation between sides where with victory comes the right to hunt down and crush the enemy. It is democracy in the Schmittian sense of the term: a democracy in which political victory justifies any and all attacks on the separation-of-powers principle. A democracy in which everything is politicised and polarised and no idea is legitimate if not held by the majority. So, for instance, the rights of Polish women over their own bodies are no longer fundamental rights but a political opposition between traditional values and liberal values. Without a legitimate and shared frame of reference, only the expression of the majority counts. An illiberal democracy.

7. So what has happened to the Utopia we were promised? What of the brave new world expected by the fall of the Soviet block and the advent of liberal democracy all over the world? What happened to the European project bringing shared peace and prosperity to its ever closer and more numerous peoples? What happened to the hopes of the ‘sweet commerce’

bringing autarkic India, and then communist China into the fold of the Western liberal consensus? What happened to the post-material overcoming of every human being’s material needs? Well, the ‘end of history’ was actually a return to history. A thawing of entire blocks allowing movements to regain momentum.

Allow me a short dip into personal history. When I reached Greta Thunberg’s age, the world was in the process of a major upheaval. Devoid of a strong political education and the necessary references, I witnessed, rather than fully understood, the tectonics at work. The Iron curtain cut through, a symbolic wall taken down, a couple of dictators chased from their Bucharest palace and hanged, and the first controversies about the role of the modern media: 1989 was indeed a lot to take. Then came the Gulf crisis and the first war of the New World Order, and we moved from hailing the end of history to discussing or fearing a hypothetic “clash of civilisations” (Huntington 1993). The age of certainties was shaken by a constant redrawing of the great lines dividing the world. In this “geopolitics of chaos” (Ramonet 1997), it took some time to build up a personal political compass reliable enough to withstand this constant succession of polarities.

Meanwhile 1992 had brought to our attention, and decision, two overarching polarities. The Rio Earth summit did not achieve the mobilisation matching the magnitude of the urgency, and the sign is that a twelve-year-old girl, Severn Suzuki, voiced there the same generational concerns and protest Greta Thunberg did 27 years later, without attracting the same attention and outrage. But the Maastricht treaty and its 1992 ratification referendum did. Europe had to be the project of this generation. Europe would be our answer to uncertainties. We would be the first, the elders of the new generation of the ‘real Europe’.

After four generations of builders.[3] The first phase had been about making Europe or die. It was the ‘Europe-as-a-necessity’ generation. Made up of those who had had to endure and even wage two world wars and the fight against fascist regimes, headed by the likes of Adenauer and De Gaulle, Monnet, Mannsholt and Gasperi, this generation viewed the

3 I developed this rough ‘generational approach’ with Benjamin Joyeux (2014).

construction of a reconciled European community as the one necessary way to not fall again into the hellfires of war. Taking over in the 1970s in the West and after 1989 in the East, the second was the generation of ‘Europe-as-a-dream’. They were the ‘children of the war’, as they had experienced the last war as young people or were born close to its end. For them the European dream was their utopia. Someone like Dany Cohn-Bendit embodies very well their commitment to put the European construction always above any other political priority.

But they were quickly followed by the ‘children of peace’. The third generation viewed ‘Europe-as-a-constraint’. Paying lip service to the ideal of the construction, they made the continent’s political integration a kind of raison-d’état without ever reflecting in-depth on the meaning of this political endeavour – except to rally against it. Or play the infamous double-speak blame game, where the good news is national while the bad ones come from Brussels.

The following generation matured with the Erasmus programmes, the Schengen border slashing and the effective delivery of prosperity. This fourth generation started with the last of the generation X, but the bulk was made of millennials: ‘the real Europe’, as German sociologist and former College of Europe Rector Robert Picht (2007) labelled them. They would fulfil the prophecy. Bring order and justice to the European imperium. They would be the ones bringing to power the dreams of the second generation. They would make the European utopia a reality.

8. But it didn’t go as planned. When the “Europe réelle” (Picht 2007) generation reached power, it did not do what the dreamers had expected. The forty-something and younger ones, Kurz, Strache, Di Maio, Salvini, the new generation of the Polish government, they are “l’Europe réelle”. So are Philippot, Baudet, Abascal, or the Jobbik founders: they all stem from “l’Europe réelle”. However, they’re building another kind of Europe.

Since the outbreak of the financial disaster in 2008, the EU and its national governments have been hopping from summit to summit, plagued by their inability to respond in a conclusive manner to the various challenges they have had to face. Too little, too late, too scattered, too technocratic, and too undermined by many reluctant member states. One consequence of this increasing collective weakness: the forces feeding on the opposition to the EU have been strengthened. Bolstered by a new generation of populist

leaders, these movements have gained enough dynamic to seriously challenge the democratic game in many countries, in the European parliament, and in the balance of power between the member states.

Against the almost complete exhaustion of the current legitimacy of most established powers in EU member states, these populists provide sense (and hope). And making sense spares you the necessity to be credible in your policies, or even to be right. Being believed is enough. The “clash of civilisation” might be bogus, but it resonates with first-hand observers as ‘there is a problem with Islam’. And the populist rhetoric always maintains a whiff of realism. It resists the ‘common sense’ reality check and feeds on the incoherence, contradictions and even lies of the established powers, as well as on the short memory-span of the public – and the light-speed polarisation due to our submission to social networks’ stimuli.

At the European level, the strength of these movements is first and foremost in the imaginary they carry: a centuries-old European civilisation made of proud nations and great peoples, whose identity and ‘European way of life’ are threatened by the Gog and Magog of the Apocalypse: a cosmopolitan, technocratic liberal globalist elite, and a fantasized ‘Islam’, melting together migrants, Islamic terrorists and European muslims. The return to our familiar well-chartered and bordered nation-states will only be a first step: these proud European nations must cooperate in order to repel the two beasts. “A strong Europe needs strong nation-states.” (Orbán 2018)

Their spill-over in the mainstream right, epitomized by the ideological evolutions of many EPP members (in France, Slovenia, Bavaria, Austria, to name a few) is an ideological victory for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has spearheaded these new forms of reactionary democracy since 2010.[4] Since 2015, when Budapest’s Keleti railway station was turned into a huge camp for refugees fleeing Syria, the strong man of central Europe has rolled out barbed wire along Hungary’s borders with Croatia and Serbia, justified police violence towards refugees and organised a phoney referendum to show that Hungarians do not want migrants. But, above all, he has evoked the fall of Rome to exaggerate

4 For a useful and inspiring tour of Viktor Orban’s idelogy and thinking, read Poinssot 2019.

migratory pressure by re-baptising it *Völkerwanderung*, ‘migration of peoples’, which farther west, in France, is in traditional historiography referred to as *grandes invasions*, an expression combining late 19th-century anti-German revanchism and a very Western view of a Romanised Gaul terrorised by repeated incursions of ‘barbarian’ Germanic tribes.

There is of course a certain irony in hearing talks of a ‘besieged fortress’ out of the mouths of the last great invaders to settle for good in Europe, when the Magyar cavalry swapped the vast expanses of central Asia to colonise the edge of the Holy Roman Empire. Since then, on the frontiers of Christendom, it has been the Catholic Hungarians in the centre – and the orthodox Serbs in the Balkans – who have claimed the dubious honour of being the pernickety ushers for a Europe that is still the final destination and not yet a departure point.

This rhetoric of ‘true Europeans’ defending civilisation against hordes of barbarians is the classic thin veil thrown over a modern racist fantasy cultivated by reactionary intellectuals and their conspiracy-theorist surrogates: the ‘great replacement’, a hazy ‘theory’ haunting the intellectual right since the end of the 19th century and re-kindled in 2011 by French essayist Renaud Camus, fantasizing the gradual substitution of the native white and culturally Christian European population by people from Africa and the Middle East, who conceal their dark colonialist designs under the tear-jerking disguise of the refugee or destitute migrant escaping poverty. A book that ended to be a killer, as it directly inspired the terrorist mass-shooting at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019.

Orbán’s rhetoric has enjoyed remarkable success in both online and offline circles that like to whip up identity-based panics about declining economies and birth rates, the rise of Islam, migration, terrorism, the moral decadence of the West, and so on, all of which are of course deliberately orchestrated by the cosmopolitan liberal elites of global finance capitalism. The most glaring example of this hate is the Hungarian prime minister’s depiction of George Soros as public enemy number one. A propaganda exercise worthy of a totalitarian regime, topped off with a smattering of barely concealed antisemitism.

9. So the fulfilling of the European prophecy didn’t really go as planned. Or did it? Contrary to what a majority of pro-Europeans would assume,

the radical right is no longer against Europe, as the usual nationalist used to be. It is not even anymore against the EU. It rather seeks now to take over the European institutions, subvert their functioning, and exert power at continental level. Because they have a vision: European Civilisation, and a plan: Fortress Europe.

Let’s consider for a moment the true meaning of this ‘Fortress Europe’ that the radical right has been contributing to build even before they achieved government positions – for erecting walls and fences at the border of the EU predates the current electoral fortune of these movements. The tragic images of African migrants climbing the barbed-fences of Ceuta and Melilla in 2005 and the questionable use of EU funds to pay for Moroccan custom police action are directly echoing the deal struck by the EU Council and Turkey a decade later to keep migrants at bay, or the horrible stories of Libyan retention camps financed by EU money and complacency.

With the symbol of the migrants significant historical changes are fought off. It seems that the radical right is trying to keep Europe safe from strong contemporary developments, eventually actually from the world. In their ‘Fortress Europe’, society is meant to be shielded from all the fundamental changes brought about today by historical evolutions, such as the continuous movement towards women’s emancipation and empowerment, or the consequences of global competition and economic warfare. Or the urgent fundamental adjustments to respond to climate change, such as breaking away from the addiction to fossil fuels, meat-based diet and unbridled consumerism.

In a sense, the EU would be the shield to protect this white middle-class paradise, pickled in the moral certainties and material comfort of its European way of life. Another attempt at putting an end to history. This is where the pro-EU liberals and EU-critics of the radical right share a feature: they both project onto the process of European integration their representation of the end of the story, trying to hold still the great movement of history. Liberal or fascist, Europe here once again stands as a Utopia.

But nowhere more than in the European Union and its perpetual peace project can the stinging discrepancy between the end and the return of history be felt. Can we really believe that the EU is history coming to its conclusion?

Of course this would be absurd. Europe and the European construction is in no way the end of the journey. And the fascist revival we are witnessing is not the end of the EU nor of the European idea. Integrating Europe cannot be a substitute for political thinking, or a means to stop the great pendulum of the human adventure. There is actually another way to look at the European integration process: as a vehicle to keep history on the move, exactly. Not just a way to expand the voice of the smaller nations on the world stage. Or build a block the size of its US or Chinese competitors. All these are legitimate but impoverished purposes to keep building Europe.

The bedrock of the European spirit is reconciliation. However, reconciliation does not mean the end of conflict. Friends still disagree. Managing their dissent is the true essence of what is called ‘democracy’. This is why democracy is Europe’s raison d’être. Democracy is political power accepted against the promise of self-empowerment; it is general interest balanced with the respect of individual freedom. Hence, institutional checks and balances, transparent processes and accountability of the ones invested with public offices make the core elements that ensure the sustainability of a democratic system.

But the root of any truly democratic system lies in its purpose. Democracy is above all a political project shared and collectively defined: it may be the pursuit of happiness or the realisation of a classless society. What matters to this social contract is its ‘raison d’être’, the rationale behind its adoption.

Up to the Fall of the Wall, the first phase of EU history was about shared peace and prosperity in order to scare off the ghosts of a horrible past and the spectre of the Soviet threat. 1989–92 marked the spectacular success of the European endeavour. However, since then, the goals and purpose of the European integration process have never been fully and explicitly rethought, defined, and democratically shared and acknowledged.

10. There are a few raisons-d’être for a political integration of Europe: size in the global competition, single market for growth, protectionism etc. But with regard to the long term perspective, the achievement of a truly continental democracy might be the most compelling one. With fundamental, then civic, and finally social rights, the building of national democracies has been a historical journey of collective conquests and counter-balances

to dominant, established powers. The most salient task of the modern state has been to equalize life chances and socialize the risk faced by individual citizens. The next chapter in the history of democracy could well be to uphold and extend these rights beyond their national frameworks. As Balibar (2001) once put it, “the EU must be more democratic than the nations it is made of”.

Which requires the building of a transnational form of democracy (cf. Tavares 2019). Why transnational? Because obviously today’s powers (financial markets, global corporations), threats (climate change, environment degradation, terrorism, nuclear escalation) and challenges (regulating globalisation, international migrations, regional wars) are of transnational essence. Thus their counterbalance needs to be of the same nature. At stake here lies the ability to reclaim power at individual and collective levels, without fuelling the national narrative.

Transnational in opposition to both ‘international’ and ‘global’. In fact, internationalism did not survive the blow of the nationalist slaughterhouse and died in the blood and mud trenches of Northern France in 1914. As for ‘global’, Bruno Latour (2019) convincingly dismisses it as adding confusion and fostering further impotence by tying together too many contradictory polarities (infinite growth and planetary limits, for starter):

> Today, we tell people both that the goal of globalisation has become impossible due to the environmental crisis and that we should therefore retreat inside the nation state, while knowing full well that it’s impossible. […] My question is: what can we say to people today who, for good reason, demand the protection of a nation state when this state doesn’t exist as far as their real interests and attachments are concerned? Can we say anything other than: “you are populists, you are neo-fascists who want to turn back the clock, and the best you can hope for is that economic growth continues”?

Bruno Latour’s *Down to earth: politics in the new climatic regime* (2017) is an absolute must-read. Because it offers one of the best contemporary attempts to save politics from impotency by supplying a grip on reality. For Latour: it’s the ecology, stupid! Which makes perfect sense when one realises how much ecology is about re-claiming power over one’s individual life and over a community’s destiny. Taking back control on what you eat, what you breathe, where you live and how you live. There is a paradox indeed, of feeling trapped between the hammer of a doomed

system and the anvil of knowing that it is doomed. “It’s the denial of the climate situation that sets up this whole political situation”, so Latour (2019).

My point is not institutional nor in favour of any particular party. It is to argue how much the ecological narrative is about reclaiming power. Over our plates, our streets, our air and water, our cities, our communities. How this can be the utopia in an age of apocalypse.

11. The rising tension about climate change has reached new peaks when the cold tone of a Swedish teenager mobilising her fellow youngsters turned all of a sudden brutally emotional in her address to the UN summit. The messenger drew a lot of attention. But it’s the message that should have our attention – for it is one of a foretold catastrophe. Her message is only one more chapter in the great book of revelations about the dire state of our planet.

Documented since the 1970s and the first club of Rome report, confirmed by an overwhelming scientific consensus since then, heralded by marginal green politicians since the 1980s and increasingly part of today’s common knowledge, the destructive consequences of the anthropocène are only slowly trickling down into the consciousness of mainstream decision-makers.

No sane mind, especially one that benefits the situation, and feels more threatened by its reversal than by its impact, would willingly adhere to an apocalyptic message. It takes the illumination, the exaltation of sectarian beliefs, the leap of faith. The denial is rooted in the fact that acknowledging the forthcoming collapse implies to take it seriously. Therefore, to initiate and undergo a complete upheaval of the economic system and its complex social and administrative ramifications. And there too, the gradual realisation of the unequal distribution of wealth is no historical accident or natural order, but a very well maintained pyramid – where the top 20 % benefiting from the situation have only to convince the next 30 % that they could, they will, be joining them, to ensure the preservation of the system (cf. Scott 2012).

Ecology here is working both ways, as the revelation, the unveiling of the catastrophe bred by a fundamentally unsustainable and inequitable system of production. But it works as well as the political grip, the utopian narrative to instil individuals and groups with a renewed sense of purpose.

The problem is that political action to avoid catastrophe is immensely less powerful than the prime movers of modern politics. We started our path at the door of the national cathedral. But the church of growth carries the same awe-triggering authority. Like the nation, it belongs to the age of industry. The imagination and imagery linked to the industrial revolution are ones of conquest and limitless expansion. Growth is the promise of a better tomorrow, a brighter future free from the pains and travails of the present. Growth is about fortitude. It is the reward for our efforts and the promise of rest after committing our strength to the economic activity. Growth is a word of conquest, the basic concept of a positive narrative and a drive for mobilising human forces and resources.

Growth is the language of Hope. In other terms, it is a religious idea, the equivalent of a gospel, the promise of both redemption and eternal reward, the cornerstone of a belief system. Only the equivalent of a Reformation movement could pretend to overthrow its reign. The key is to make the ecological narrative strong enough to counter such system of belief. But without substituting another religious illusion to the beaten credo.

And this is where the lessons of the nation could be applied. The question would be that of an ‘earth nationalism’. It could be a change of scale in terms of enemy and outlander to bring about an identity against some alien invader. Facing some Galactus character, the giant Planet-Eater villain imagined by the *Fantastic Four* comics creator, would indeed bring about a feeling of common destiny to a disoriented humanity.[5] But replacing an illusion by a lie would not work long enough in an age of unveiling.

So there is a change of imaginary to be advocated, for sure. This is what the amazingly poetic and overwhelming novel of Richard Powers *The Overstory* (2018) demonstrates: the power of literature and art should prove much more efficient than that of communicant and spin-doctors. The emergence of such alternative representation of the world is fundamental to crystallise in what Latour (2017; 2019) calls an “attractor”, which is a polarising concept, pointing to a direction like the magnetic north ‘attracts’ the needle of a compass. This new attractor could simply be encapsulated by the word ‘Life’. The growth of a tree and that of the

5 Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1961.

economy have only the name in common, since the tree needs to die for the economy to grow.

12. Let us conclude by coming back to Utopia as a story of the end of history. In these times of apocalypse, we need stories that can powerfully showcase a desirable alternative future. Indeed, from the individual sense of purpose to the collective action it triggers, *The Overstory* offers such narrative of a change of scale in terms of brotherhood and collective action over the world. Similar to that of a national community. 40 years ago, Ernest Callenbach tried to draw the political contours and social dynamics of a utopian ecological country, in the purest tradition of Utopia as both a critical reflection of the present and a desirable representation of the future. The quality of his *Ecotopia* (1975) lies less in the style and imagery than in the exhaustive, almost academic, rendition of all societal aspects (almost all, actually: the blind spot on the racial issue is a major flaw in the book). But from the mentality to the arts, to the fabric of love relationships, instead of a technology-driven story of science-fiction, Callenbach showcases a human-driven narrative.

A political ecological utopia as strong as nationalism, in order to bring about a sense of shared community. We would need more poets and historians to lead politics, and fewer accountants and economists, or sociopaths. Our collective imagination needs to be fed a different kind of stories. Stories that will no longer be rooted in the necessity to conjure fears but in the democratic strive to uphold the dream of a great leader of the past century who enjoined us to “live together as brothers or perish alone like fools”.[6]

A long march ahead. But one worth taking every step towards, this is perhaps what utopia in the age of apocalypse could look like.

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6 Martin Luther King in his speech in St. Louis, Missouri, 22 March 1964 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNPpEQkep2k).

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