



GREEK TRAGEDY AND DEATH OF THE EUROPEAN MYTH: THE WASHINGTON VIEW

In January 2009 the end of the Bush presidency closed one of the worst eras in transatlantic relations, but the start to Obama's term has not brought the two universes any nearer. A clear and wholesale revising of American foreign policy priorities, and a different approach to the finance crisis, have kept the two political arenas apart.

Europe's response first to the global crisis and then to the Euro crisis in 2010 has given the US intellectual community cause for concern – what they see as Old Continent prudence and lethargy; it has also invited the Americans to pass sweeping judgment on decades of EU experience. The debate underpinning USA-EU relations no longer hinges on Donald Rumsfeld's opportunistic dividing of "old Europe" (western) from "new Europe" (eastern and more Atlantist), but on the US elite's disillusionment with a European social model they see as unsustainable and every bit as risky as America's own. American distrust of France is proverbial; there is now a new diffidence about Germany, as well as alarm for global financial stability jeopardized by the least virtuous countries of the EU.

In recent months America's disenchantment with Europe seems to have deepened, and not because of Europe's increasingly clear non-commitment to Afghanistan, over which US foreign policy has never harboured illusions. What concerns the States is the internal political and economic scene in Europe. The Atlantic faction is openly worried at Turkey's increasing detachment from European ambitions in favour of Erdogan's "strategic depth" which smacks of a "neo-Ottoman" mentality. Only the "Charlemagne" blog showed awareness of Euro-American confusion here: "urging Europe to fight any eastward drift of Turkish diplomacy ... risks conflating EU membership with support for American policy in the Middle East" (*If Only It Were That Easy*, "The Economist", 19 June 2010).

But what weighs on less elitist swathes of American public opinion (non *Economist* readers, in short) is the risk of Europe declining economically. The popular magazine *Time* focuses on the EU being stuck half-way in its recent

evolution and needing reforms inside the Euro area since the Union needs still more integration (Michael Schuman, *How To Fix Europe*, "Time", 12 July 2010). Others have described the European position in still harsher terms: Judy Bachrach traces a parallel between the EU and the southern confederate states at the time of the American civil war: "Europe is the ... modern equivalent of the old Southern Confederacy: united (sort of) but desperate, drained of resources, prudence and initiative, with a long-established history of promising its citizens the moon" (Judy Bachrach, *Greek Myths: The End of Europe's Free Ride*, in "World Affairs", July/August 2010). The American Jewish intelligentsia magazine *Commentary*, creeping ever-nearer to neo-con thinking, talks of European decadence in no uncertain terms: "'decadence', with its connotations of self-indulgence and decline, is not too strong a word for the response we have seen to economic success, especially in much of Europe over the past few decades" (James K. Glassman, *Notes on Europe's Economic Decadence*, "Commentary Magazine", July/August 2010). On similar lines and following up a provocative essay in late April by the guru of American geopolitics Walter Russel Mead, *The American Interest* covers Euro-American relations in a special issue in which Laqueur predicts a future of decline for Europe based on economic data, the impact of immigration and internal divisions among Europeans: "The Europeans have gotten themselves into a strange fix. They have expanded their Union to the point of decision-making paralysis but would consider expanding still further. They cannot deepen the Union, lest residual memories of democratic accountability roil Europe's individual national souls." Laqueur suggests that the EU problem is also a problem for the Americans and above all sees the current situation as a failure of naivety by the Europeanist elite: "The twenty-first century was to be the century of Europe. Its values would become the values of the world: exemplary democracy, an unqualified respect for human rights, sustainable economic growth, stability-oriented monetary policy, social justice. Nice try; bad guess." (Walter Laqueur, *Better Fifty Years of Europe?*, "The American Interest", July/August 2010).

America's perception of the European problem has nothing to do with ideology or party prejudice. While some catastrophic analyses of the European position clearly come from neo-conservative or Republican think tanks (like the Cato Institute) which are historically hostile to any European ideal of State and welfare, one cannot claim that American disillusionment is confined to one

ideology or the other. Even Kupchan of the Council on Foreign Relations traces the main cause of Europe's crisis to re-nationalization which may lead to the death of the European Union: "not a dramatic or sudden death, but one so slow and steady that we may look across the Atlantic one day and realize that the project of European integration we have taken for granted over the past half-century is no more" (Charles Kupchan, *As Nationalism Rises, Will the European Union Fall?*, "The Washington Post", 29 August 2010).

Europe's response to the Greek crisis has also driven many American observers to seek the heart of the Europeanist crisis in Germany's new, albeit covert, economic nationalism. In a long essay George Soros accuses Berlin of not realizing the responsibilities that come from being the leading economic power in Europe: "Something has gone fundamentally wrong in Germany's attitude to the European Union": Germany is forcing all the European countries to adapt to her Procrustean bed, which is to say an absolute partiality to a strong currency and a balance-sheet that squares (George Soros, *The Crisis and the Euro*, "The New York Review of Books", 19 August 2010). Soros' view of things was only confirmed by the outcome to the Toronto G20 where the Obama administration policy ended up isolated against the line-up of Germany, Great Britain and Canada over what deflationary policy to adopt. Again, on a more political and diplomatic note, the editor of *Foreign Policy* sees Angela Merkel's Germany as a dramatic equation between the country's non-economic resources and the challenge of European leadership: "Lacking the naïve exceptionalism of America and France, the German public doesn't countenance a projection of German power elsewhere in the world: Germans have the capability, but not the ethic. They don't long for world leadership, and in those instances when they exercise it – as in the European Union – the do so reluctantly" (Cameron Abadi, *In the Absence of Grand Strategy: The German Debate Over Afghanistan*, "Dissent Magazine", 18 May 2010).

To paraphrase the well-known witticism about relations between the United States and Great Britain ("two nations divided by a common language"), one might say that at the dawn of the twenty-first century Europe and America are two nations divided by a common economic, tax and social crisis.

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