HABERMAS’S MANIFESTO FOR A EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE: A CRITIQUE

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I

On May 31, 2003 leading European newspapers published a ‘Manifesto’ calling for a ‘Renaissance of Europe’. The text was written by Jürgen Habermas, and supported by Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty and other intellectuals. In February of that year millions of people had protested in the capitals of Europe, as elsewhere around the world, against the preparation of war against Iraq by the Bush administration. While these protests had not prevented the ‘violation of international law’ that the invasion of Iraq in April represented, what was especially significant about these protests, the Manifesto suggested, was that they nevertheless contributed to the ‘birth of a European public’. Above all, they raised anew the issue of a ‘European identity’, and of a ‘vision for the future of Europe’ that might represent an alternative to the global strategies of US imperialism.

Habermas was well aware of the fact that the war against Iraq intensified – like a ‘catalyst’ – contradictions and tensions not only in the transatlantic relationship, but also within the European Union itself. The gap between those European states who joined the ‘coalition of the willing’ – Great Britain, Spain, Italy, along with Poland and the other states of Donald Rumsfeld’s ‘New Europe’ – and those from ‘Old Europe’ who refused to join Bush’s alliance for this war (France, Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg) only reflected the existence of deeper conflicts in the field of European politics which had intensified since the Nizza Summit of December 2000: conflicts on institutional and financial issues, on eastward enlargement, on the New Constitution of Europe and especially on its Common Security and Defense Policy. The war further widened the gap between the Anglo-Saxon and the continental countries of Western Europe as well as the gap between Western Europe and the new members in Middle and Eastern Europe. It could be surmised that American neo-conservatives calculated the US could
achieve at least two goals by attacking Iraq: winning the war and acquiring direct American control over the Middle East, and weakening the European Union which is regarded as a partner, but also as a potential rival – especially in respect to the restructuring of ‘Eurasia’, the area of the world Brzezinski has called the ‘Grand Chessboard’ of geopolitical strategy in the post-Communist era.²

The message of the Manifesto was that the citizens of Europe needed to become aware of their common political fate. The need to enlarge their ‘national identities’ with a European dimension was related to the importance of ensuring that the ‘ignorant and expensive alternative of war or peace’ would be rejected. Europe needed to ‘bring its full weight to bear at the international level and within the United Nations in order to balance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States.’ Any future design of world order could not be accepted without the participation of the EU. In a ‘complex global society’ it is not only military power, but also the ‘soft power’ associated with negotiations, economic advantages and institutionalized relationships that count.

For Habermas, ‘European identity’ reflects the historical traditions and elements of the political culture of Western Europe.³ European societies and states, having been taught bitter lessons by the experiences of class struggle, imperialist war and colonial exploitation in the 20th century, have come to support the construction of ‘Europe’, i.e. ‘government beyond the nation state’, and to embrace the social security and solidarity of the welfare state. The experience of war, of totalitarianism and especially of the Holocaust, according to Habermas, has strengthened the moral basis of politics in Europe (e.g. with respect to the death penalty), and has proved the value of an approach to international politics that tries to prevent war by supranational forms of cooperation.

Europeans, according to the Manifesto, have learnt to respect differences; they have a feeling for the dialectics of enlightenment, modernity and technological progress. In European societies the relationship between religion and the state is different from that in the United States: ‘We could hardly imagine a president opening his daily work with a public prayer and referring to divine missions while announcing political decisions with serious consequences.’ And in Europe, there exists ‘trust upon the civilizing potential of state intervention’ which corrects deficiencies of the market and enables solidarity and equality. This is a legacy of the struggles and the power of the working-class movement – as well as of Christian social traditions – in 20th century Europe. So, Europeans still prefer the ethics of ‘more social justice’ against the individualistic ethics of competition that accept extreme social inequality.
As Habermas put it elsewhere, these elements of a ‘European (postnational) identity’ should enable the EU ‘to confront the USA with an alternative (universalistic) vision and concept of world order’ which has emancipated itself from eurocentrism and nourishes the Kantian vision of global domestic politics regulated by law and by stable (and powerful) international institutions (‘global governance’). Obviously, Habermas is concerned with outlining the basic elements of a counter-hegemonic project which – represented by an EU which has acquired more ‘qualities of a state’ (including military forces) – might be able to balance US unilateralism and world dominance. In the Manifesto’s words, this would counter the ‘hegemonic vision, which not only rhetorically but also practically determines the present government of the United States and which is in sharp contrast to the liberal principles of a new world order which were proclaimed (in 1991) by the father of the present president.’

II

What are we to make of the European ‘counter-hegemonic project’ that Habermas’s Manifesto represents? At most it might be said this is a project in the making, a ‘still fragile and not very strong EU-centered West European game of balancing against US hegemonic power politics’ that Gowan has called ‘subversive bandwagoning’. To be more than this, such a project surely requires considerable financial investment in the coordination and modernization of European military forces, which would have the paradoxical effect of draining resources away from the welfare state, and thus undermine Europe’s alleged distinctiveness. Yet, for the kind of Europe Habermas has in mind, military power is not the decisive factor in defining the characteristics of counter-hegemony, but rather the concept of ‘good governance’, which focuses on human rights and ‘on rule-based treaty regimes on a global scale instead of power politics and stresses the peaceful resolution of conflicts.’

When Habermas wrote his Manifesto for the renaissance of Europe as a reaction to the Iraq-War he was convinced that this was a good historical moment for concentrating these elements of a European identity into a political force supporting the international politics of the governments of Germany, France and Belgium within the EU. To overcome the problems faced by an unfinished European project still weakened by inner contradictions and national interests, Habermas advanced the concept of ‘intensified cooperation’ among the countries that make up ‘core Europe’. As the Manifesto puts it: ‘If Europe is not to fall apart the core-European countries have to apply the mechanism of “intensified cooperation”… in a ‘Europe of different speeds’ they must take the initiative for a Common Foreign,
Security and Defense Policy.’ This avant garde of ‘core Europe’ – built around the French-German-axis and the Benelux-countries – should not separate itself from the rest of the EU but act like a locomotive eventually pulling the others behind them.

Germany always had to fight to introduce this procedure into the Treaty; resistance came from France and Britain as well as from the smaller states – which all share the suspicion that Germany might use this opportunity to impose its national politics and interests (especially in the economic and monetary field) upon the EU as a whole by strengthening a ‘two class’ Community divided between Germany and its allies on the one side, and the weaker countries of the periphery on the other. In May 2000 Joschka Fischer, Germany’s Foreign Secretary, set out the terms for the renewal of the project of ‘core Europe’ in a lecture at Berlin’s Humboldt University. He argued that the coming enlargement of the EU from fifteen to twenty-five or even thirty member states underlined the necessity of institutional reform to enable Europe to act in world politics, and that the new constitution had to allow intensified cooperation of some members in certain policy-fields. In this way a ‘centre of gravity’ in the EU would be formed which could function as a locomotive for the ‘completion of political integration’.8

The relationship between Habermas and Fischer dates back to the time when Habermas was teaching at Frankfurt University and Fischer was operating from Frankfurt first as a Green Party member of the state parliament of Hessen, and then as a minister in the government of Hessen, before becoming leader of the Greens in the Bundestag in Bonn. In 1999 Habermas had supported the position of the German government – and especially the position of Fischer as Foreign Minister – in the Yugoslav War. He justified the attack on Yugoslavia by NATO (and Germany’s participation in this) with the argument that the use of military force was a necessary element in policing universal human rights and legal conventions, in this case preventing genocide in Kosovo. However clear it became how easily this idealistic cosmopolitanism could be abused for the uses of American and European power politics, Habermas has never revised this position. But in 2003, against the background of the decision of the German and French governments not to join George W. Bush’s coalition for the attack against Iraq, and in a climate of widespread criticism and protest against US-politics all over Europe and the world, Habermas again backed the German government (and Fischer, of course). His Manifesto elaborated Germany’s position against the US war policy vis-à-vis Iraq into a concept of potential European counter-hegemony against a new US imperialism.

Unfortunately, the project of ‘European identity’ and ‘counter-hegemony’ against the USA is far from being able to balance US power in world poli-
tics and in international institutions. It might best be characterized as a ‘Third Way’ project for international politics dominated by social democratic and liberal governments in the EU supported by smaller states (e.g., the Benelux countries) that could never profit from globalization by enlarging their military power. Obviously such a project is viewed by ‘policy elites in Washington … with real hostility,’ and this fed the polemics across the Atlantic that intensified during the run up to the Iraq war. Yet, this is not a strategy to strengthen an alternative to American imperialism or to the neoliberal capitalist globalization it oversees.

Habermas’s Manifesto obscures a rather crucial dimension in its representation of Europe. Since the beginning of European integration the Western European bourgeoisie has always had two parallel aims: to profit from being a junior partner (what Brzezinski went so far as to call a ‘vassal’) of the USA, but at the same time to construct a strong European competitor of the American economy and state. The objective of Jacques Delors’ project for the Single Market and Monetary Union was to strengthen the competitiveness of European capitalism in respect to American capitalism. The introduction of the common currency was inevitably accompanied by the question, as Gilpin put it, of ‘whether or not the euro will replace the dollar as the world’s principal currency, what the consequences for the United States would be if it did, and how the euro would affect the functioning and management of the international monetary and economic system.’ At the same time the enlargement of the EU to Eastern Europe – though raising a lot of difficult problems – has been successfully pushed forward by the motive to improve the competitive position of ‘Eurocapitalism’ within the world market.

As Robert Kagan has said: ‘By binding together into a single political and economic unit – the historical accomplishment of Maastricht in 1992 – many hoped to recapture Europe’s old greatness in a new political form. “Europe” would be the next superpower, not only economically and politically but also militarily. It would handle crisis on the European continent, such as the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, and it would re-emerge as a global player of the first rank.’ Yet during the ’90s, as Kagan himself concludes, Europe actually failed to intervene as a unique actor in international politics and crisis management. This was evident in relation to the war on Yugoslavia, but it was true in much else as well, especially in the international economic sphere.

Indeed, since the first steps to Monetary Union at the end of the 70s, and the new dynamics of European integration launched by the Single Market project after 1985, the EU has been dominated by the politics of neoliberalism. The most important ‘new constitutionalism’ in Europe in this sense has been the one that Stephen Gill over a decade ago identified as associated with
applying the ideology that national governments have no choice but to adapt to the constraints of transnational markets and competition, to dismantle the welfare state, deregulate labour markets, privatize public goods and ownership and weaken trade unions. This has become the dominant tendency in European politics in the ‘90s. Though Jacques Delors promised to strengthen the ‘social dimension’ of the EU, the results were very modest. Trade unions enjoy enlarged participation rights in European policy networks, yet social legislation at the EU level has not made real progress. Unions rather confront a paradox: their co-optation into the neoliberal projects of the EU (Single Market, Monetary Union, European Financial Market, Common Market for Services, Eastern Enlargement etc.) has not contributed to overcome the crises of the trade union movement in Europe. It rather weakens their capacities to fight neoliberalism ‘at home’.14

Habermas does not even mention these dominant tendencies which are steadily destroying the European welfare states and transforming them into ‘workfare’ regimes.15 Thus, his Manifesto’s appeal to ‘European identity’ was less convincing than the earlier public letter of criticism organized by the late Pierre Bourdieu against the neoliberal politics of the EU and its member states.16

The dominance of neoliberalism is precisely the mechanism through which the EU is integrated in and subordinated to the American Empire. Though in the past few years social protests (including general strikes and mass demonstrations organized by European trade unions in cooperation with the anti-globalization movement) have become much stronger, they have not had any considerable influence upon European politics, and portend nothing like the ‘fundamental change in the domestic balance of social forces’ that would be required to bring about a ‘disarticulation’ of European states and/or the EU from the American empire.17 Transatlantic relations thus remain based upon a complex system of common and competing interests. European states and the leading fractions of European transnational corporations and financial institutions have an interest in creating a strong European economy on the basis of the euro as the new common currency and the construction of a European financial market. But at the same time they have remained bound into the ‘Dollar–Wall Street Regime’,18 and have accepted the leading role of the American state in reconstructing the capitalist world order after the end of the Cold War.

Insofar as intra-imperialist rivalries can still be said to exist, they are much weaker than they were in the period between 1914 and 1945, and are not really characteristic of the ‘new imperialism’ of our time. Of course, nobody can exactly foresee the full political and economic consequences of the disaster Iraq has become for the USA and its allies. And the American
economy still is burdened by many risks. If world politics and the world economy become increasingly turbulent, the concept of ‘European counter-hegemony’ might acquire more importance, used to strengthen the position of EU against the USA and to build alliances (e.g. with Russia and China or with Middle East countries) in the United Nations and other international organizations. Still, the majority of European economic and policy elites favour the strategy of partnership with the USA. They merely criticize the politics of the present neoconservative American government and hope for a political change in the USA that will tilt the balance towards multilateralism based upon the recognition of international law.

III

Habermas’s Manifesto was criticized on many sides. To some it was simply a document of ‘European anti-Americanism’; others blamed Habermas for being too close to the German government and especially its Foreign Secretary, Fischer. As the governments of the new members of the EU in Eastern Europe (already members of NATO) supported George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, and so strengthened the position of Tony Blair, José Maria Aznar and Silvio Berlusconi, it was quite obvious that the Franco-German-Belgian-coalition was in a minority position and far too weak to be a serious ‘core’ or ‘centre of gravity’ within the newly expanded EU. Some critics argued that Habermas and his friends had forgotten to include any intellectuals from Eastern Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world. Richard Rorty, on the other hand, wrote an article praising the Habermas initiative as a relief for American intellectuals protesting against neoconservative politics. Yet, more telling was the fact that on the whole Habermas was far more confronted with the argument that his appeal contributed to the split of Europe rather than to ‘Europeanize’ its intellectuals.19

Such criticism might explain why the Manifesto did not gather massive support and its prominent subscribers remained politically and intellectually isolated. More important, however, was the process which finally decided the fate of the Franco-German initiative which had proposed to lead the EU into opposition against the US policy on Iraq and, at the same time, to realize projects of political integration. This, as Habermas’s Manifesto remarked, might indeed have improved the EU’s ‘qualities of a state’ under the leadership of the Franco-German alliance. The Bush administration, of course, tried to break up this strategy, well aware that its allies in Europe are not only governments that are closely bound to the US by security interests (as in Eastern Europe) or by ideological motives, but also those economic and political forces that prefer transatlantic partnership led by the USA instead of inter-imperialist rivalry or any counter-hegemony defined in terms of the
welfare state. In Germany, for instance, the Christian Democratic Party (but also some dissidents within the Social Democratic Party) attacked Chancellor Schröder for ‘anti-Americanism’ and for following an extremely dangerous ‘German way’ in international politics. Though the majority of people all over Europe were clearly against the war, many among the political and economic elites warned against putting the Atlantic partnership at risk. Since Schröder likes to present himself as an ally of modern German capitalist management (especially in the automobile industry), he must have been quite sensitive to pressures from the management of German corporations and banks engaged in the American markets not to go too far. And indeed, by the spring of 2004, the German Chancellor was being warmly received in the White House: Bush and Schröder emerged with a joint statement stressing common interests and positions in the transatlantic partnership. At the same time, Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer now proposed a new direction for Germany’s vis-à-vis Europe: he said goodbye to the project of ‘core Europe’ pushing forward political integration, and spoke in terms of ‘strategic Europe in continental dimensions’ (including Turkey), a concept based primarily on the big Common Market. A year after the issuing of Habermas’s Manifesto, it was all but forgotten.

Obviously, these changes were produced by painful facts. On the one hand, the disaster of the American occupation of Iraq in the context of a presidential electoral campaign has made the Bush administration more willing to look for compromise with the European states outside the ‘Coalition’. On the other hand, the Franco-German-Benelux Alliance did not succeed – a majority of EU-members (as well as of new members) rejected the claim for leadership by those states associated with ‘core Europe’. The minority position of these states, moreover, was not only confined to the Iraq war but expanded to a series of central issues of integration policy – especially the European Constitution which was accepted by the Convention and the Council but then rejected by the governments of Spain and Poland (both firmly on the side of the USA in the Iraq question). Consequently, in the second half of 2003 the EU approached paralysis and crises. The resolution of this crisis in the spring of 2004 took the form, not of the victory of the Franco-German-Benelux Alliance (whose meetings in Brussels were ridiculed as ‘chocolate summits’), but the renunciation of the project of ‘core Europe’ itself.

This failure does not mean that the project of a ‘European counter-hegemony’ against American imperialism does not exist any longer. It is still a project of those in Europe who aim to strengthen the EU – politically, economically and ideologically – as a global political actor capable of balancing US imperialism and unilateralism. But however much this project
might be justified in terms of ‘soft power’ and ‘good governance’ based upon international law, human rights, transnational civil society and democracy (while also serving to stave off any suspicions that it might be seen as a project for a new ‘Euroimperialism’), it is clear that such a project connected to the claim of leadership by the Franco-German alliance has no chance. Within global capitalism, the American state is strong enough to rely upon the mechanisms of ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’ and to activate its political and social allies to oppose such a project of ‘European counter-hegemony’.

Perhaps the main lesson that may be learned from Habermas’s failed Manifesto is that the field of international politics, dominated as it is by competing interests among states within the EU, let alone with the American state, is not the appropriate place for rallying critical intellectuals against American imperialism. At the moment progressive movements inside and outside the EU are not able to change the basic relations of forces dominated by global capital and neoliberalism. They need, however, to be addressed as potential actors for the construction of a counter-hegemony which is not based upon the competition between two neoliberal variants of capitalism but upon the programme of a real alternative to American and European-led global capitalism, i.e. a new socialist project.

NOTES

1 Jacques Derrida und Jürgen Habermas, ‘Unsere Erneuerung. Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas’, (After the War: The Renaissance of Europe), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 31, 2003, pp. 33/34. Unless otherwise indicated all the following quotes are from this text.


3 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, Die postnationale Konstellation, Frankfurt/Main 1998. In 2001 Habermas had supported the project of a European Constitution launched by the Summit of Laeken. He spoke of ‘the necessity of a European civil society, the construction of a political public in Europe and of the creation of a political culture which is shared by all citizens of the EU’ (Jürgen Habermas, ‘Warum braucht Europa eine Verfassung?’, Die Zeit, 27/2001.


7 This has been a central element of German European policy since the Maastricht Summit in 1991, when the government of Britain refused to join the Economic and Monetary Union and rejected the ‘Social Charter’, which
was accepted by the other members but only added to the Maastricht Treaty as a ‘Social Protocol’. Since the foundation of the European Community in the ’50s unanimous voting has been the basic principle of decision making within the Council; this rule has always strengthened the smaller countries and imposes strategies of negotiations open for compromises (‘package deals’). The Single Market programme of the 1980s weakened this principle in favour of majority votes. The enlargement of the Union from twelve member states in 1991 to twenty-five in 2004 proceeded on the basis of the ‘two speed Europe’ introduced in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) as the ‘procedure of intensified cooperation’, and was further strengthened by the treaty finally signed at Nizza in 2001 (the chaos of the Nizza summit and the protest of the Spanish and Polish governments against the draft of the European Constitution in 2003 was produced by conflict over the question how to define the majority). The draft of the new European Constitution institutionalizes ‘intensified cooperation’ in Chapter III/Article 3. The procedure allows those ‘member states that intend to intensify their cooperation’ (for instance in the field of monetary policy or in the field of Foreign and Security Policy) to advance, while those who don’t want to join or who are not yet able to join can wait and join later. Yet the rules of the Treaty are very narrow and stress the exceptional character of this mechanism.

8 Joschka Fischer, ‘Vom Staatenbund zur Föderation – Gedanken über die Finalität der Integration’, Integration, 3/2000, pp. 149-56. Note that Fischer stressed he was speaking in his private capacity.


11 ‘The closest thing to an equal that the United States faces at the beginning of the 21st century is the European Union (EU). Although the American economy is four times larger than that of Germany, the largest European country, the economy of the EU is roughly equal to that of the United States; its population is considerably larger, as is its share in world exports. These proportions will increase if, as planned, the EU gradually expands to include the states of Central Europe over the next decades. Europe spends about two-thirds of what the United States does on defense, has more men under arms, and includes two countries that possess nuclear arsenals …’, Joseph Nye, The Paradox of American Power, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 29-30.


14 Frank Deppe, ‘Die Gewerkschaften und der “Eurokapitalismus”’, in Martin


18 The term is Peter Gowan’s, from his The Global Gamble, London: Verso, 1999.


20 Notably, the policies of Alan Greenspan and the Federal Reserve to drive down the exchange value of the US dollar which severely hits German export industries and functions as one of the brakes on economic recovery in Germany, were not denounced even though these amounted to an act of ‘financial warfare’ much more effective than the polemics of Donald Rumsfeld.


22 In March 2004 this alliance was strengthened by the victory of the Spanish Socialists under Zapatero in the general elections which threw José Maria Aznar, the best friend of George W. Bush besides Tony Blair, out of office. The terrorist attack in Madrid shortly before the elections and the crude manipulation of information by the conservative government (implying ETA responsibility) might have influenced voting behaviour. Yet, the decisive fact was that from the beginning of the Iraq war a huge majority of the Spanish population was against the war and especially against the participation of Spanish troops. So, this was not a ‘victory of terrorism’, but a victory of the anti-war movement. Zapatero declared immediately the retreat of troops from Iraq as well as a closer relationship of Spain with France and Germany within the EU. At the moment (May 2004) it is far too early to evaluate the consequences of this change of the relation of forces within the EU. If the Italians would throw Silvio Berlusconi out of office and replace him by Romano Prodi, the current president of the European Commission, then the debate around a European ‘counter-hegemony’ might be continued on the basis of a different setting of the relation of political forces within the EU, with the initiative now emerging from beyond the states of ‘core Europe’.