Out of the Prison of Memory. Nations and Future

Edited by

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This book demonstrates the main peculiarities of nations related to *memory* and *future*: the notion of *historical truth* and its relations to *memory* and *literature,* on the one hand, and the importance of the future for the survival of the nation, on the other hand. The monograph offers the questions of individual experience, such as feminism and migration in this respect; and finally, the possibilities of historical reconstruction based on the documentary and non-documentary sources are overviewed in the publication.

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Nations and Memory: The Importance of the Future and Acting as if What Really Happened Had Not Happened[1]

GERARDO LÓPEZ SASTRE

Abstract. Do real nations need a past? The problem with the past is that memory can act as a prison that does not allow us to create a better future. Sometimes it is wiser to act as if what really happened had not happened or to recognize that there is significant room for interpreting what happened in different ways. This is part of democracy.
Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Europe, Memory.

This paper talks about philosophy and nationalism, specifically what philosophy (let's call it critical reason) can tell us about nationalism. Someone once said: "I knew exactly what a nation was until I was asked about it." We must recognize that the idea of nation is not clear. To give an example from Spain, some politicians say Spain is a nation; others say Spain is a nation of nations (a nation including several nations within it). But they fail to say how many nations we should consider. Some politicians will say that Madrid is a nation if they think this will earn them more votes. This gives the impression that being a nation is a problem of self-definition. All any human group has to do is to declare itself a nation to become one. This might be the case, but then we must try to be clear about how we should consider some human groups, which we could call societies.

While attempting to clarify this subject, I want to discuss what I will call the philosophical meaning of Europe; or, in other words, the kind of ideal European political system we should try to build. And we

[1] This essay is part of my contribution to a research project entitled "El desván de la razón: cultivo de las pasiones, identidades éticas y sociedades digitales" (FFI2017.82272-P: PAIDESOC), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. It was originally presented at the Seminar "Cultural Memory and Formation of Public Opinion in the Second Half of the 20th Century in Europe" organized on February 16, 2019, by Professor Vladimer Luarsabishvili at New Vision University, Tbilisi, Georgia. I am very grateful to all the participants, whose questions and opinions contributed to improving this paper. Any errors or possible contradictions are obviously my responsibility.

will see that the presence of time (future and past, aspirations and memory) is quite important amid these subjects.

As I have just said, since we can assume that nations are societies, we first have to analyze what a society is, how we should consider societies and our relationship with them. And for this purpose, I will use the ideas of an eighteenth-century philosopher, David Hume, one of the fathers of liberal thought.[2]

Hume's analysis of society depends on his view of human nature and of two circumstances of external (natural or artificial) objects:

1. First, we have to take into account that "each person loves himself better than any other single person, and in his love to others bears the greatest affection to his relations and acquaintance".[3] The consequence of this idea is quite clear in one of his essays, "Of the Independency of Parliament":

> POLITICAL writers have established it as a maxim, that, in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a *knave*, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest. By this interest we must govern him, and, by means of it, make him, notwithstanding his insatiable avarice and ambition, cooperate to public good.[4]

2. We must combine this characteristic of human nature with two characteristics of external objects:

2.1. Scarcity: "There is not a sufficient quantity of them to supply every one's desires and necessities".[5]

2.2. External objects can change hands without suffering any loss or alteration. What I find useful, another can find useful, and what I immediately like, another can like.

This tendency of the human mind together with these two circumstances of external objects creates the certain risk of us being deprived of these objects – objects acquired by luck or through work –

[2] See López Sastre, 2018: 205–229 for an explanation with more details.
[3] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section II, 487.
[4] Hume, 1985:42.
[5] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section II, 488.

by violent attacks. For Hume this is the most important obstacle to the constitution and preservation of any society. Consequently, it is due to our eagerness to acquire goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends – and Hume believes that this eagerness is insatiable, perpetual and universal – that there will be continuous conflicts and fights among people. We are not far from Hobbes.

The extent of humankind's greed seems, therefore, to incapacitate us for social life; but society is necessary to satisfy human passions, because there is a major discrepancy in people, considered as mere individuals, between their many needs and desires and the limited power of the natural gifts they have to satisfy them. And it is society that is called on to remedy this discrepancy. According to Hume, we obtain three extremely important advantages from our social life:

1. Society increases our *power* by allowing individuals' strength to come together to perform the same project.

2. Society increases our *ability*, because the division of labor makes it possible for each person to specialize in a given task.

3. Finally, we must consider the *mutual help* that can be provided once we live within a society. It gives us security against the ups and downs of fortune and accidents of life.[6]

At this level, we should not doubt that Hume is right as to the advantages of social life. Only cooperation with people allows us to build bridges and ships, drain marshes, and so on. And it is only because I live in society that I can expect to change the products of my work with those created by others. This allows me to specialize in a specific field and increase my skill in it extraordinarily. As others also increase their skill at what they do, the overall result is growth in general productivity, something we all benefit from. And if I can expect the help of other people, it is because cooperation and exchange has accustomed them to deal with me.

Given these advantages, humankind's situation is quite paradoxical. If, on the one hand, we need society to satisfy our desires, it is no less true that the natural impetus of our passions makes this impossible. Fortunately, Hume contends that nature provides a remedy

[6] See Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section II, 485.

for this situation in the faculties of judgment and understanding. When we observe that the main disturbance of social life arises from the ease with which external goods can pass from one person to another without losing any of their qualities, we seek a remedy for this situation by placing these goods at the same level as the advantages of mind and body as far as possible (in normal circumstances we are not afraid of being dispossessed of our mental or bodily qualities, because they are not qualities that can be snatched from us, nor is it likely that those who deprive us of the use of these qualities can gain any benefit from doing so).

In any case, external objects can only be placed at the same level as mental or physical characteristics through a convention all members of society enter, thus deciding to give stability to the possession of external goods. As Hume writes:

> I observe, that it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, *provided* he will act in the same manner with regard to me. He is sensible of a like interest in the regulation of his conduct. When this common sense of interest is mutually express'd, and is known to both, it produces a suitable resolution and behaviour. And this may properly enough be call'd a convention or agreement betwixt us, tho' without the interposition of a promise; since the actions of each of us have a reference to those of the other, and are perform'd upon the supposition, that something is to be perform'd on the other part. Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other. Nor is the rule concerning the stability of possession the less deriv'd from human conventions, that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it.[7]

By abstaining from others' possessions we do not really act against our passions; on the contrary, it is through this convention that we implicitly establish social life and it is thanks to social life that we achieve our well-being. In this respect, it is evident that the passion or desire for gain is self-controlled so it can be better satisfied in the long run. One

[7] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section II, 490.

thinks of the close analogy of this analysis with what Sigmund Freud says about how the principle of reality, which represents the outside world to us, protects – rather than destroys – the principle of pleasure. This principle of pleasure, blindly striving for immediate satisfaction, without regard for the power of external forces, would lead to disaster in our lives. But, by delaying or deviating the gratification of our impulses, by teaching us to value security, by making us realize that joy and play often require fatigue and work as a precondition, we succeed in surviving and prospering.

Coming back to Hume, what does putting the role of property allocation at the core of society mean? Let's make it clear, for Hume a society is not a large family, it is not an environment where we meet our most intimate emotional needs. It is not what we would today call a community. It is an association of owners that try to maximize their own interests.

The introduction of private property allows people to tolerate one another. They decide not to interfere with the results of others' work or to take away the things they enjoy. But although this is very important, it is only a first step.

A second step is to create a way by which the contact between us can be mutually advantageous. This is the invention of the rule that establishes trade, the law of the transfer of property by consent. According to this law we accept the idea of maintaining the stability of possessions "except when the proprietor agrees to bestow them on some other person."[8] We need three basic facts as our point of departure:

1. Different parts of the Earth produce different goods.

2. Different people are adapted by nature (or prepared by education) to perform different activities.

3. Some people possess more of an asset than they can use to their advantage, while lacking other things at the same time.

When we ponder these facts, the advantages we can attain through trade become obvious. If we said above that a society is an

[8] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section IV, 514.

association of owners, we are now seeing that for Hume society is also a market.[9]

There is still another law or principle that can make contact between people even more advantageous. After all, the transfer of things by consent only affects specific goods that are available to us at the time of the exchange. How can we, then, exchange services or reach agreements that involve the delivery of goods in the future? Hume describes a typical situation of non-cooperation:

> Your corn is ripe today; mine will be so to-morrow. Tis profitable for us both, that I shou'd labour with you to-day, and that you shou'd aid me to-morrow. I have no kindness for you, and know you have as little for me. I will not, therefore, take any pains upon your account; and shou'd I labour with you upon my own account, in expectation of a return, I know I shou'd be disappointed, and that I shou'd in vain depend upon your gratitude. Here then I leave you to labour alone: You treat me in the same manner. The seasons change; and both of us lose our harvests for want of mutual confidence and security.[10]

Is there any way to avoid this loss for both sides? Is there a way to make cooperation (with its multiple benefits) possible? The solution to this kind of problem is the invention of a "*certain form of words*", or to be more precise, of promises. As Hume writes: "When a man says *he promises anything*, he in effect expresses a *resolution* of performing it; and along with that, by making use of this *form of words*, subjects himself to the penalty of never being trusted again in case of failure."[11] The obligation of promises is created, consequently, not by some kind of internal commitment, but entirely by the public action of giving our word. Our mental attitude has nothing to do with this subject. Secret reservations do not make the obligation disappear. Once you give your word, you have to keep it.

The peace and security of society (which is like saying its subsistence) depend entirely on these three rules or, as Hume also calls

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[9] For this idea of societies as an association of owners and as markets see Stewart, 1963:118.
[10] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section V, 520–521.
[11] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section V, 522.

them, laws of justice. To summarize, a developed social life is only possible thanks to:

1. The institution of private property.
2. Exchange by mutual agreement.
3. Promises or contracts.

The origin of these three institutions lies in people's intelligent egoism, because, as previously mentioned, we do not feel an important affection for each other (at least for people we do not know, which is the case of most people we interact with in our lives); but Hume emphasizes that these institutions generate a system that, including each individual's interest, is also advantageous to the public, even though this was not its inventors' aim. This passage, so similar to Adam Smith's famous one on the invisible hand, demonstrates Hume's liberalism. As we have seen, this liberalism is based on a careful consideration of humankind's passions. Society has been created and is maintained because our intelligence teaches those passions (our own interests) how they can be better satisfied. We have seen that the urge to acquire goods and possessions is insatiable, perpetual and universal. Benevolence toward strangers is too weak to counterbalance its strength (this means we cannot rely on morality to cement social life), and other passions are more likely to inflame this greed, for we have observed that the more possessions we own, the higher our capacity to gratify all our appetites.[12] The eagerness to possess, therefore, acts in all of us, and everyone has reason to fear their uncontrolled actions, because this would lead to a violence that would make us prefer a solitary condition. If this does not happen, it is thanks to our sagacity, to a reason that tells us that by maintaining social life we are more likely to acquire those possessions that we so much desire and to enjoy them safely. But even if reason tells us this conclusion, we may feel tempted by the interests of the moment. As he writes in a passage that must be quoted in full:

> every thing, that is contiguous to us, either in space or time … commonly operates with more force than any object, that lies in a more distant and obscure light. Tho' we may be fully convinc'd, that

[12] See Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section II, 492.

> the latter object excels the former, we are not able to regulate our actions by this judgment; but yield to the solicitations of our passions, which always plead in favor of whatever is near and contiguous. This is the reason why men so often act in contradiction to their known interest; and in particular why they prefer any trivial advantage, that is present, to the maintenance of order in society, which so much depends on the observance of justice. The consequences of every breach of equity seem to lie very remote, and are not able to counterbalance any immediate advantage that may be reap'd from it. They are, however, never the less real for being remote; and as all men are, in some degree, subject to the same weakness, it necessarily happens, that the violations of equity must become very frequent in society, and the commerce of men, by that means, be render'd very dangerous and uncertain. You have the same propension, that I have, in favor of what is contiguous above what is remote. You are, therefore, naturally carried to commit acts of injustice as well as me. Your example both pushes me forward in this way by imitation, and also affords me a new reason for any breach of equity, by shewing me, that I should be the cully of my integrity, if I alone shou'd impose on myself a severe restraint amidst the licentiousness of others. This quality, therefore, of human nature, not only is very dangerous to society, but also seems, on a cursory view, to be incapable of any remedy. The remedy can only come from the consent of men; and if men be incapable of themselves to prefer remote to contiguous, they will never consent to any thing which wou'd oblige them to such a choice, and contradict, in so sensible a manner, their natural principles and propensities. Whoever chuses the means, chuses also the end; and if it be impossible for us to prefer what is remote, 'tis equally impossible for us to submit to any necessity, which wou'd oblige us to such a method of acting.[13]

In fact, we have two problems:

1. We often fail to perceive the strong interest that binds us to the observance of justice and equity. In other words, we do not perceive that it is in our own interest in the long run to respect other people's

[13] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section VII, 535-536.

properties, not to cheat in the market, and to keep promises. As Hume writes, this is a problem of lack of "*sagacity*"

2. We often do not have enough mental vigor to persevere in a firm adherence to a general and distant interest, as opposed to the charms of the advantages and pleasures of the moment. We are tempted by the interest of the moment, even if it is less important than an interest that happens to be quite distant. This is the problem of the lack of "*strength of mind*".[14]

How can we solve these problems? Hume's answer is "to change our circumstances and situation, and to render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote."[15] What brings about this change? The invention of government, because a government's action saves me from myself. If I break a rule of justice, prison awaits me. All the above is the foundation of any nation.[16] It is a rational interest: To protect individuals in the enjoyment of the objects they possess, to allow them to trade them in such a way that they benefit from the exchange, and to make or receive promises that they know will be fulfilled.

Is there more to society than this? What about patriotism? What about the sense of belonging to something bigger? What about the feeling of participating in a common history? What about traditions we are proud of? It is time to descend from rational analysis to the real world. And in the real world (as Heidegger would say) we have time, history.[17]

My point of departure is two quotations. The first is taken from Samuel Johnson, who said that "patriotism is the last refuge of a

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[14] We have another third problem, which Hume calls the "sensible knave", the person who has enough sagacity to understand the importance for all of us of abiding by the rules of justice, and has the strength of mind to follow them, but decides that it is in their own interest to secretly break them. That is, they decide to become a free-rider, benefitting from the fact that others respect the rules, but they do not play their part. See Hume, 1998:9, 155.

[15] Hume, 1978: Book III, Part II, Section VII, 537.

[16] I would like to insist again on a previously mentioned point: Hume is proposing an analysis. This is quite different from a historical enquiry about the origin of nations or governments.

[17] On the following pages I will follow López Sastre, 1993:71–94.

scoundrel".[18] We could wonder why he said that. The second quotation is taken from a well-known book on political theory, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*. The chapter on nationalism begins with these words:

> Nationalism is the starkest political shame of the twentieth century, the deepest, most intractable and yet most unanticipated blot on the political history of the world since the year 1900. But it is also the very tissue of modern political sentiment, the most widespread, the most unthinking and the most immediate political disposition of all at least among the literate populations of the modern world. The degree to which its prevalence is still felt as a scandal is itself a mark of the unexpectedness of this predominance, of the sharpness of the check which it has administered to Europe's admiring Enlightenment vision of the Cunning of Reason.[19]

I believe both are right to a certain extent. And to convince my readers of this idea I will study the definition of nationalism provided by John Breuilly in his book *Nationalism and the State*. According to this definition, nationalist theories are built on three basic assertions:

> (a) There exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character.
> (b) The interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values.
> (c) The nation must be as independent as possible. This usually requires at least the attainment of political sovereignty.[20]

The first of the above statements is not usually correct. Nations are the products of history. It is, therefore, untrue that nations exist first in a natural way, and that States are then created to correspond to or align with the limits, with this nation's outline. Instead it is the other way around. Creating a state paves the way for the mechanisms of cultural

[18] This statement was made on April 7, 1775. Surely, we must not take it as a condemnation of patriotism in general, but of this kind of use of patriotism that is a cloak for self-interest, as when we say today that some politicians "wrap themselves in the flag".
[19] Dunn, 1993:57.
[20] Breuilly, 1994:2.

homogeneity, the beginning of a unified system of education, the diffusion of a common language, a bureaucracy, the building of roads and a unified transport system. As time goes by, these elements lead to the idea that nations are natural. But it takes a long time. That is why I believe it is quite easy to understand what we could term the artificial nature of the United States of America, or of other contemporary nations that were former colonies of European countries. We only have to look at its completely straight borders. We can clearly see they are artificial nations because they only have a modern, recent history. But we (Europeans) have a propensity to believe that our nations are natural, not the product of States' historical contingencies and of their actions. In Europe it is said that geography determines nations' limits; but what does geography have to do with the limits between Spain and Portugal? Another often reiterated notion is that sharing a common language results in a nation. But what about Switzerland? Are we supposed to divide it between France, Italy and Germany?

The problem with the second nationalist theory statement (that the interests of nations must have priority over all other values and interests) is not that it is untrue, but that it is immoral. I believe this is the moral scandal John Dunn refers to.

For example, two months before his death Machiavelli wrote in a letter to Francesco Vettori: "I love my native country more than my own soul". The unpleasant aspect of this idea is that it makes it clear that someone would be willing for their soul to be condemned (eternal damnation) doing something they know is completely wrong just because with it they believe they are defending their country's interests.[21] History has taught us that nationalism has justified all kinds of crimes in this way.

[21] This clearly contrasts with what Christ asks: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Mark 8.36–37; and see also Luke 9.25. As an interpreter comments after making this comparison: "Machiavelli's answer is a Ciceronian choice and a pagan exchange. Machiavelli is willing to lose his soul in order to save his country … the safety of the city, and not of the soul, is made into the moral and ethical standard: 'when it is absolutely a question of the safety of one's country [*patria*], there must be no consideration of just or unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praiseworthy or disgraceful;

At this stage in my argument many readers might agree with this opinion, although they could remark that the definition of nationalism I am using fails to address the fact that many people who vote for nationalist parties would never dream of harming anyone. We cannot say that all nationalist people are immoral. Besides, to a certain extent all of us are nationalists, because we are normally more concerned or more interested in our own country's problems than in the problems of other nations or any vague ideal.

I would now like to distinguish between two different concepts of what a nation is; or, in other words, to enquire whether there is a kind of moral kernel, a moral core, in the idea of a nation. Using a well-known distinction between the political and cultural ideas of nation is very convenient here. As Alfred Cobban wrote in his now classic book *National Self-determination*:

> The nation as a political unit, or state, is a utilitarian organization, framed by political ingenuity for the achievement of political, with which may be included economic, ends. Politics is the realm of expediency, and the measure of its success is the degree to which the material bases of the good life – law and order, peace, and economic welfare – are realized. The nation as a cultural conception, on the contrary, is normally regarded as a good thing in itself, a basic fact, an inescapable datum of human life. It belongs to the realm of the activity of the human spirit, its achievements are in the fields of art and literature, philosophy and religion.[22]

When a nation is considered as a datum, as something that it is given and that we are not supposed to try to change, I think we are in the presence of a characteristic case of alienation. In alienation cases people are subjected to something they have created, although they do not recognize it as such. The philosophy we have to remember here is Feuerbach's. He was interested in what we would today call the philosophy of religion, and his most famous thesis was that God was a

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instead, setting aside every scruple, one must follow to the utmost any plan that will save her life and keep her liberty' (*Disc*, 3.41)". Fontana, 1999: 657.

[22] Cobban, 1954: 60.

creation of the human mind. God was the idea of the kind of things that humans would like to achieve. God's life is the kind of life humankind would like to have: Never-ending, eternal, omnipotent or all-powerful. But according to Feuerbach we fail to recognize we are talking about a mental creation, and instead see the opposite: We think we have been created by God. To put it in philosophical terms, the subject (humankind) is converted into predicate, and the predicate (God) is converted into the subject. We fail to recognize our own creation and, on the contrary, we believe we have been created by it. This is alienation.

I would say that this way of thinking can be applied to nations. If the political use of the cultural idea of nation is a way of alienation (for example, when a government asserts that languages have rights: Departing from the fact that people have languages, it proclaims that languages have the right to have people, who can be coerced to be educated in it), the political idea is the liberation from it. Nations must be understood as productions of people's activities and wishes over the course of history; and I see no reason why we would have to accept a given situation and not submit it to the judgment of our reason or our will to change it. From a political point of view, we have to be aware that we build nations for the advantage of human interests, and that we have to evaluate nations according to the measure or level they satisfy human needs. Once we consider nations in this way, the first consequence is that we must understand nations as the manifestation of the will of a set of citizens. Consequently, we should agree with Renan when he says that a nation is a daily plebiscite. Or to put it in other way: We must see nations as supported by the kind of contract that Hume defended.

Alexis de Tocqueville says something similar in his *Democracy in America* when he writes that there is an instinctive patriotism, a feeling that ties a man's heart to his birthplace, a feeling that is united with a taste for old customs and memories of the past. Those "who cherish it love their country as they love the mansions of their fathers". This patriotism is a kind of religion; rather than reasoning, it feels, believes, and acts; and, therefore, it is characteristic of obedience to an

ancient order of things, of situations whose legitimacy is not contested. We could say it is characteristic of simple people. But Tocqueville says there is another kind of patriotism that is more rational than the one he has been describing; while perhaps less generous, it is more fruitful. Produced by enlightenment, it grows with the exercise of political rights. As he writes: "A man comprehends the influence which the prosperity of his country has upon his own welfare; he is aware that the laws authorize him to contribute his assistance to that prosperity, and he labors to promote it as a portion of his interest in the first place, and as a portion of his right in the second."[23] This quotation tells us that a kind of nationalism (political nationalism) results from enlightenment. It stems from the exercise of political rights, and assumed to take note of personal interests. Thus, we are talking about a nation of citizens who exercise their democratic rights.

Given we now understand how we should consider nations, it is time to ask this question: What kind of relationship should this political unit (the nation) have with other nations? Some lines written by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* can give us an answer. Burke says that "to love the little platoon we belong to in society is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind."[24] These words tell us an important characteristic of our concerns and human solidarity: Both take the form of an expanding circle. We go from the little groups we participate in to our country and from there to humankind. As a result, we must think

[23] Tocqueville: 269.

[24] Burke, 1987: 135. I am afraid that Burke would not support my defense of political nations, however. He wrote that the state is not "a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." Burke, 1987:194–195. This idea of a contract creating obligations with the dead could hinder the idea I will put forward of memory not being a prison, and that the future is more important than the past in building nations.

about human solidarity as framed by the varying links (of different sizes) in a chain. Montesquieu wrote this about the matter:

> If I knew something useful to me, and harmful to my family, I would reject it from my mind. If I knew something useful to my family, and not to my country, I would try to forget it. If I knew of something useful to my country, and harmful to Europe, or useful to Europe and harmful to Mankind, I would look upon it as a crime.[25]

Consequently, nations must be considered as only one link in a big chain. The space we give ourselves with the idea of promoting some of our interests, but that cannot enter in opposition to the whole chain; that is, humankind. We must insist on this issue: From the point of view of reason, nations have only one kind of legitimacy. The fact that we have to solve our problems in the easiest way under the constraints of time, of the command of one or several languages, with only a small amount of information, and so on. And nations are the mechanisms we devise (considering these issues) to solve our problems.

What does all this have to do with the European Union? We have just seen that nations act as mechanisms to solve people's problems. If our problems and circumstances change, changing the kind of nation we participate in is quite rational. We now have problems that no nation can solve by itself. We only have to think about ecological problems. We really live in a global society where everyone's actions affect an increasing number of people. The development of the Internet has provided us with an incredible amount of information. In this new situation, why not change our nation? Or rather, why not expand our nation to solve our old and new problems? I believe this could be the philosophical meaning of the European Community, founded on the idea that we can become enlightened citizens.

With all these ideas in mind (ideas that talk about aspirations, desires to be satisfied, the future) it is time to talk about the past, about memory.

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[25] Quoted in Pagden, 2013:247; and for this idea, see all of chapter 7, "The Great Society of Mankind".

As Ortega y Gasset would say, it is true that a nation is a circumstance, namely the circumstance of people who have been educated and live in a particular place. Humans are born in a society and immersed in a particular tradition. These offer them their resources and make them view the world in a specific way. It is as a result of this circumstance (society and traditions) that people are rooted in the world. This circumstance is something that is at first imposed, something we are immersed in, whether we want it or not. We do not have a choice. It is a contingent identity, which normally appears in our passports, and this identity determines our life up to a certain point. This is a way of recognizing that the societies we are brought up in have a past that is conveyed to us for good or evil. But our socialization process can be – or rather should be, as this is our proposal – of assimilation or of rejection. A society will be more perfect, more advanced, the more possibilities it offers its individuals to choose their own lifestyles, or simply to abandon the contingent identity that their birth provided them and choose another. And, conversely, the more facilities it offers those who voluntarily, for pleasure or interest, want to integrate themselves into it. I do not think we have reflected enough on people's ability to move, and that not taking advantage of this fact (which technological developments make increasingly important) to expand our margins of freedom would be quite unreasonable. And this is significant because besides this contingent or accidental identity we have our post-conventional identity as world citizens, reflective beings of reason that accept or criticize the traditions where they live based on criteria concerning our interests and considerations that, from a moral point of view, are supposed to be universal.[26] This shows that we are not fully absorbed by our community and that we can distance ourselves from its values. This should be openly rejoiced, because I do not think we should

[26] Consequently, De Maistre was wrong when he wrote: "I have seen, in my time, Frenchmen, Italians, and Russians. I even know, thanks to Montesquieu, that one may be a Persian; but as for Man, I declare I have never met him in my life; if he exists, it is without my knowledge." Quoted in Tamir, 1993:13. I would say that with a bit of abstraction and imagination we can see individuals behind all these people from different nationalities, as some revolutionaries could see them behind the black skin of the slaves and perceive their situation as completely unjust.

insist much on which of these two identities – the contingent, or the post-conventional or post-traditional – should have preference. The priority should be to achieve a specific self-awareness as members of a global society where our actions end up affecting all other human beings. And this cosmopolitanism is part of European identity. I think Ortega was right when he insisted that we used to talk about being Europeans without defining what Europe was. He avoided this by insisting on an idea we agree with, that Europe was equal to Science, Freedom, and Individualism.[27] Furthermore, in a lecture delivered in 1953 and entitled "Is there a European cultural awareness today?" Ortega said:

> Part of European culture, perhaps even its most characteristic feature, is to suffer crises periodically. This means that, unlike others, it is not a closed culture, crystallized once and for all. Consequently, it would be a mistake to try to define European culture by considering its contents or subject-matter. The glory and the strength of European culture is that it is always willing to go *beyond* what it was, beyond itself. European culture is a perpetual creation. It is not an inn, but a path that always compels us to walk. Now, Cervantes, who had lived a lot, told us when he was quite old, that the road is better than the inn.[28]

If European culture cannot be defined by its contents (although we will have to make an important clarification about this below), it will have to be defined by how it proceeds. And this way of proceeding is rational criticism, which is what allows creation and the idea to always go beyond. To speak of Europe is, therefore, to speak of enlightenment, of the desire to subject everything to the criticism of a discursive reason that publicly debates; and, precisely for that reason, to be willing to dispense with the roots, with what tradition has bequeathed us, be that customs, traditions, a religion, or a specific national identity. To be

[27] Ortega wrote in *The Revolt of the Masses* that European people form "the human type that has thrown all the efforts and fervors of their history into the scale of individualism". Ortega, 1998:283.
[28] Ortega, 1985: 28.

European is to accept this freedom; and that supposes admitting that political concept of nationality we have outlined before. The concept that in the political ordering by means of nations sees a way for the flourishing of freedom and global humankind.

It is true that Europe has been the cradle of imperialism. The European expansion was the extension of exploitation. In its bosom there was racism and contempt toward other cultures. This is evident. But the only answer that can be given to this fact (understood as an objection) is that the European culture can save its essence by universalizing it in a consistent way. In fact, what national liberation movements usually did was to turn the "European" ideologies of enlightenment and socialism against European imperialism. According to this, European culture is no longer anyone's heritage, or rather it is the heritage of the entire human race. A Europe that would withdraw into itself would not be true to the best of itself, would be betraying the best of its cultural legacy, the legacy that insisted that nothing human could be alien to us. Here we could do well to remember John Donne's words, which Hemingway put at the beginning of his novel about the Spanish civil war, and which give it its title:

> No man is an Island, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

This we can accept, although it leads us to ask the following question: Why not consider that besides our loyalty to some universal or very general moral values, we prefer to have a particular way of life, a distinct history that is our own, and not that of all humankind? Something we could feel especially proud about. But we have a choice about these matters (it could be a religion, a sexual identity, our identity as members of the Republic of Letters in the case of intellectuals, etc.), a chosen identity, *but inside our nation*. Because nations are plural and this plurality must be respected. Freedom can be useful to ensure that diversity, often the result of an accident (the place where we were born

and the culture we were educated in), becomes a freely chosen diversity, a product of individuals' choices. In the end, if it is true that any society normally prefers its own customs to those of other societies, it does not have to follow that an individual has to prefer those of the society where they were born to those of any other. More importantly, it is not multiplicity that creates conflict between cultural identities. The problems arise when cultural identities are opposed to the concepts of freedom, equality, democracy, human rights, and so on. And this is where we need the clarification we mentioned earlier: European culture does have specific contents. But they are contents of a very special kind. I propose we call them *meta-values* to indicate that these values are such that they have the specificity of containing diverse and opposing values within them. This is how the meta-value of respect and tolerance creates the framework where multiple religious beliefs can develop. Or, in the face of diverse political ideologies, democracy appears not as another ideology, but as the meta-value that creates the playing field for the free expression of different alternatives. I believe this is the specificity of European culture: Rather than focusing on certain values, it has admitted the inescapable variety and plurality of manifestations of human life, and has been concerned with the characteristics that a society should have so that people with different lifestyles and beliefs could live together.

And what about memory? To be a real nation, does it not need a past?[29] The problem with the past is that memory can act as a prison that does not allow us to create a better future. Loyalty to the heroes of the past (the ones that died for us), to the path created by our ancestors,

[29] If there is no such past, we can be certain that someone will invent it (or "rediscover" it. As no one says that he or she is inventing the past). If we want to express this concern more positively, we could ask: Do we not need a common civil memory to help us build a strong democratic culture? My answer is negative. Or, to be more precise, I admit that this can sometimes be the case, but in other circumstances democratic culture and progress require what is part of the title of my essay: Acting as if what really happened had not happened. In more concrete terms: amnesia is a psychological impossibility, but amnesty can sometimes be a good choice. For the complexities of our relationship with the past see Sánchez Durá, 2010, 209–224.

can have terrible consequences. The idea that we have a duty to these dead heroes and that destroying their memorials would be high treason is real. I would say that the best course of action in these cases is a dialectic (which could be viewed as slightly contradictory) of remembering and acting as if we had forgotten. We obviously need to remember things. Or rather, there is no other alternative, because forgetting voluntarily is not a real possibility. Just as when we try hard to fall asleep and only manage to stay awake, the more we strive to erase a current memory, the more it will be come to mind. We could say that the action of forgetting cannot be direct since it is the result of occupying our minds with other endeavors, the prospect of building a better future, for example. We can also act as if what really happened had not happened and recognize that there is significant room for interpreting what happened in different ways. People's memories differ. And they have the right to their memory. This is part of democracy. We agree that we have the right to disagree.

Concerning this recognition of the right to act as if some things had not taken place (and that a better future can only be built from this perspective) we have to remember that in Western Europe, the French and the Germans decided "to forget" (that is, to act as if they had forgotten) their historical fight in the Second World War and start the European Union. Both had the courage to break with a past that we wished had not happened.

This proposal is not new. It was invented by the same people who invented politics as we understand the concept today: the ancient Greeks. I would like to finish with this story as told by Nicole Loraux:

> It all began with Cleocritus's speech in Xenophon's *Hellenica*. The Athenian democrats had just overcome the army of the Thirty. Some of the most important oligarchs – including Critias and Charmides, Socrates's erstwhile listeners whose names would later appear in Plato's dialogues – were among the dead … In the exultation of victory, the time was ripe for revenge, especially for those democrats who just before the battle had been reminded by Thrasybulus of the 'war' that the Thirty had waged against them and of the abuses suffered at their hands. Yet at that moment, an Athenian Citizen …

stepped before the democrats' lines to ask his hostile countrymen: 'You who share the city with us, why do you kill us?' The question itself was incongruous … it was a democrat's question, to be sure, because an oligarch would already know the answer: one's opponent is the *enemy*. But it was no more incongruous than the amnesty it announced, through which the victors would bind themselves to their former opponents, swearing the most solemn oath 'not to recall misfortunes of the past'.[30]

[30] Loraux, 2002:9. And here we have to remember what Plato writes in *The Seventh Letter*: "it was not surprising that in a period of revolution excessive penalties were inflicted by some persons on political opponents, though those who had returned from exile at that time showed very considerable forbearance." And also in the same letter: "every man to whom Providence has given even a moderate share of right intelligence ought to know that in times of civil strife there is no respite from trouble till the victors make an end of feeding their grudge by combats and banishments and executions, and of wreaking their vengeance on their enemies. They should master themselves and, enacting impartial laws, framed not to gratify themselves more than the conquered party, should compel men to obey these by two restraining forces, respect and fear; fear, because they are the masters and can display superior force; respect, because they rise superior to pleasures and are willing and able to be servants to the laws. There is no other way save this for terminating the troubles of a city that is in a state of civil strife; but a constant continuance of internal disorders, struggles, hatred and mutual distrust is the common lot of cities which are in that plight."

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