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**Étienne Balibar: We, the People of Europe?**

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## At the Borders of Europe

I am speaking of the “borders of Europe” in Greece, one of the “peripheral” countries of Europe in its traditional configuration—a configuration that reflects powerful myths and a long-lived series of historical events. Thessaloníki is itself at the edge of this border country, one of those places where the dialectic between confrontation with the foreigner (transformed into a hereditary enemy) and communication between civilizations (without which humanity cannot progress) is periodically played out. I thus find myself, it seems, right in the middle of my object of study, with all the resultant difficulties.

The term *border* is extremely rich in significations. One of my hypotheses is that it is undergoing a profound change in meaning. The borders of new sociopolitical entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve all the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled—for example, in cosmopolitan cities. But it is also one of my hypotheses that the zones called peripheral, where secular and religious cultures confront one another, where differences in economic prosperity become more pronounced and strained, constitute the melting pot for the formation of a people (*dēmos*), without which

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there is no citizenship (*politeia*) in the sense that this term has acquired since antiquity in the democratic tradition.

In this sense, border areas—zones, countries, and cities—are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the center. If Europe is for us first of all the name of an *unresolved political problem*, Greece is one of its centers, not because of the mythical origins of our civilization, symbolized by the Acropolis of Athens, but because of the current problems concentrated there.

Or, more exactly, the notion of a center confronts us with a choice. In connection with states, it means the concentration of power, the localization of virtual or real governing authorities. In this sense, the center of Europe is in Brussels, Strasbourg, or in the City of London and the Frankfurt stock exchange, or will soon be in Berlin, the capital of the most powerful of the states that dominate the construction of Europe, and secondarily in Paris, London, and so on. But this notion has another, more essential and elusive meaning, which points to the sites where a people is constituted through the creation of civic consciousness and the collective resolution of the contradictions that run through it. Is there then a “European people,” even an emergent one? Nothing is less certain. And if there is not a European people, a new type of people yet to be defined, then there is no public sphere or European state beyond technocratic appearances. This is what I meant when I imitated one of Hegel’s famous phrases: *Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa*.<sup>1</sup> But the question must remain open, and in a particularly “central” way at the border points.

There are more difficult issues. We are meeting in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, the Balkans, or Yugoslavia, at a moment when the protectorate established at Priština by the Western powers is being put into place with difficulty and for dubious ends, while in Belgrade uncertain maneuvers are unfolding for or against the future of the current regime. It is not certain that we all have the same judgment about these events, from which we will not emerge for quite some time. It is even probable that we have profoundly divergent opinions on the subject. The fact that we do not use the same names for the war that just took place is an unequivocal sign of this. It is possible—it is probable—that some of you condemned the intervention of NATO for various reasons, and that still others, also for various reasons, found it impossible to take sides. It is possible—it is probable—that certain of us saw striking proof of the subordination of Europe to the exterior, hegemonic power of the United States, whereas others saw a mercenary utilization of American power by the European states in the service of continental objectives. And so on.

I do not presume to resolve these dilemmas. But I want to state here my conviction that these events mercilessly reveal the fundamental contradictions plaguing European unification. It was not by chance that they occurred when Europe was set to cross an irreversible threshold, by instituting a unitary currency and thus communal control of economic and social policy and by implementing formal elements of “European citizenship,” whose military and police counterparts are quickly perceived.

In reality, what is at stake here is the definition of the *modes of inclusion and exclusion* in the European sphere, as a “public sphere” of bureaucracy and of relations of force but also of communication and cooperation between peoples. Consequently, in the strongest sense of the term, it is *the possibility or the impossibility of European unification*. In the establishment of a protectorate in Kosovo and, indirectly, other regions of the Balkans, as in the blockade of Slobodan Milošević’s Serbia, the elements of *impossibility* prevailed obviously and lastingly—even if one thinks, as is my case, that an intervention one way or another to block the ongoing “ethnic cleansing” could no longer be avoided and even if one is skeptical, as is my case, of self-righteous positions concerning a people’s right to self-determination in the history of political institutions. The unacceptable impasse that we had reached on the eve of the war in the whole of ex-Yugoslavia was fundamentally the result of the powerlessness, inability, and refusal of the “European community” to propose political solutions of association, to open possibilities of development for the peoples of the Balkans (and more generally of the East), and to assume *everywhere* its responsibilities in an effective struggle against human rights violations. It is thus Europe, particularly the primary European powers, that is responsible for the catastrophic developments that subsequently took place and for the consequences they now may have.

But, on the other hand, if it is true that the Balkan War manifests the impasse and the *impossibility* of European unification, it is necessary to have the courage (or the madness) to ask in today’s conditions: *under what conditions might it become possible again?* Where are the potentialities for a different future? How can they be released by assigning responsibility for the past but avoiding the fruitless exercise of repeating it? An effort of this kind alone can give meaning to a project of active European citizenship, disengaged from all myths of identity, from all illusions about the necessary course of history, and a fortiori from all belief in the infallibility of governments. It is this effort that I would like to call on and contribute to. We must privilege the issue of the border when discussing the questions of the European people and of the state in Eu-

rope because it crystallizes the stakes of politico-economic power and the symbolic stakes at work in the collective imagination: relations of force and material interest on one side, representations of identity on the other.

I see a striking indicator of this in the fact that during the new Balkan War that has just taken place the *name of Europe* functioned in two contradictory ways, which cruelly highlighted the ambiguity of the notions of *interior* and *exterior*. On one hand, Yugoslavia (as well as to varying degrees the whole Balkan area, including Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria . . .) was considered *an exterior space*, in which, in the name of a “principle of intervention” that I will not discuss here but that clearly marked a reciprocal exteriority, an entity called *Europe* felt compelled to intervene to block a crime against humanity, with the aid of its powerful American allies if necessary. On the other had, to take up themes proposed by the Albanian national writer Ismail Kadaré,<sup>2</sup> for example, it was explained that this intervention was occurring on Europe’s soil, within its historical limits, and in defense of the principles of Western civilization. Thus, this time the Balkans found themselves fully inscribed *within the borders of Europe*. The idea was that Europe could not accept genocidal population deportation *on its own soil*, not only for moral reasons but above all to preserve its political future.

However, this theme, which I do not by any means consider pure propaganda, did not correspond to any attempt to anticipate or accelerate the integration of the Balkan regions referred to in this way into the European public sphere. The failure of the stillborn “Balkan conference” testifies eloquently to this. There was no economic plan of reparations and development involving all the countries concerned and the European community as such. Nor was the notion of “European citizenship” adapted—for example, by the issuing of “European identity cards” to the Kosovo refugees whose identification papers had been destroyed by the Serbian army and militias, along the lines of the excellent suggestion by the French writer Jean Chesneaux.<sup>3</sup> Nor were the steps and criteria for entrance into the “union” redefined.

Thus, on the one hand, the Balkans are a part of Europe and, on the other, they are not. Apparently, we are not ready to leave this contradiction behind, for it has equivalents in the eastern part of the continent, beginning with Turkey, Russia, and the Caucasus regions, and everywhere takes on a more and more dramatic significance. This fact results in profoundly paradoxical situations. First of all, the colonization of Kosovo (if one wants to designate the current regime this way, as Régis Debray, with whom I otherwise totally disagree, suggested by his comparisons

with the Algerian War) is an “interior colonization” of Europe (with the help of a sort of American foreign legion). But I am also thinking of other situations, such as the fact that Greece could wonder if it was interior or exterior to the domain of European sovereignty, because its soil served as a point of entry for land-occupation forces in which it did not want to take part. I can even imagine that when Turkish participation in the operation was discussed, certain Greek “patriots” asked themselves which of the two “hereditary enemies” was more interior to political Europe, on its way to becoming a military Europe.

All this proves that the notions of interiority and exteriority, which form the basis of the representation of the border, are undergoing a veritable earthquake. The representations of the border, territory, and sovereignty, and the *very possibility of representing* the border and territory, have become the object of an irreversible historical “forcing.” At present these representations constitute a certain conception of the political sphere as a sphere of sovereignty, both the imposition of law and the distribution of land, dating from the beginning of the European modern age and later exported to the whole world—what Carl Schmitt in his great book from 1950, *The Nomos of the Earth*, called the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*.<sup>4</sup>

But, as we also know, this representation of the border, essential as it is for state institutions, is nevertheless profoundly inadequate for an account of the complexity of real situations, of the topology underlying the sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent mutual relations between the identities constitutive of European history. I suggested in the past that (particularly in *Mitteleuropa* but more generally in all Europe), without even considering the question of “minorities,” we are dealing with “triple points” or mobile “overlapping zones” of contradictory civilizations rather than with juxtapositions of monolithic entities. In all its points, Europe is multiple; it is always home to tensions between numerous religious, cultural, linguistic, and political affiliations, numerous readings of history, numerous modes of relations with the rest of the world, whether it is Americanism or Orientalism, the possessive individualism of “Nordic” legal systems or the “tribalism” of Mediterranean familial traditions. This is why I have suggested that in reality the Yugoslavian situation is not atypical but rather constitutes a *local projection* of forms of confrontation and conflict characteristic of all of Europe, which I did not hesitate to call *European race relations*, with the implicit understanding that the notion of race has no other content than that of the historical accumulation of religious, linguistic, and genealogical identity references.<sup>5</sup>

The fate of European identity as a whole is being played out in Yugoslavia and more generally in the Balkans (even if this is not the only site of its trial). Either Europe will recognize in the Balkan situation not a monstrosity grafted to its breast, a pathological “aftereffect” of underdevelopment or of communism, but rather an image and effect of its own history and will undertake to confront it and resolve it and thus to put itself into question and transform itself. Only then will Europe probably begin to become *possible* again. Or else it will refuse to come to face-to-face with itself and will continue to treat the problem as an exterior obstacle to be overcome through exterior means, including colonization. That is, it will impose in advance on its own citizenship an insurmountable border for its *own* populations, whom it will place indefinitely in the situation of metics, and it will reproduce its own impossibility.

I would now like to broaden this question of European citizenship as a “citizenship of borders” or confines, a condensation of impossibility and potentials that we must try to activate—without fearing to take things up again at a distance, from the point of view of plurisecular history.

Let us remember how the question of sovereignty is historically bound up with the questions of borders, as much political as cultural and “spiritual,” from the classical age to the crisis of imperialism in the mid-twentieth century, and which we have inherited after the dissolution of the “blocs.” We know that one of the origins of the *political* significance of the name of Europe, possibly the most decisive, was the constitution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of a “balance of powers” among nation-states, for the most part organized in monarchies.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to what one often reads in history books, this did not occur exactly with the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), signed to put an end to the Thirty Years’ War, which had ravaged the continent by opposing Protestant and Catholic forces against the background of the “Turkish menace.” Rather, it happened a little later, when two conceptions of this European order confronted each other: the hegemonic conception, represented by the French monarchy, and the republican conception, in the sense of a regime of formal equality among the states, which coincided with the recognition of certain civil rights in the interior order, embodied by the coalition put in place by the English and the Dutch.<sup>7</sup>

It was then, in the propagandistic writings commissioned by William of Orange, that the term *Europe* replaced *Christendom* in diplomatic language as a designation of the whole of the relations of force and trade among nations or sovereign states, whose balance of power was

materialized in the negotiated establishment of borders. We also know that this notion never ceased fluctuating, sometimes toward a democratic and cosmopolitan ideal (theorized by Kant), sometimes toward surveillance of the movement of peoples and cultural minorities by the most powerful states (which would triumph at the Congress of Vienna, after the defeat of Napoleon). But I would like rather to direct attention to two evolving trends, which affect this system more and more deeply as we approach the present moment.

The first of these comes from the fact that the European balance of power and the corresponding national sovereignty are closely tied to the hegemonic position of Europe in the world between the seventeenth and mid-twentieth centuries—the imperialist division of the world by colonialist European powers, including of course “small nations” like Holland and Belgium and peripheral nations like Russia, later the USSR. This point has been insisted on in various ways by Marxist and non-Marxist theoreticians such as Carl Schmitt, who saw in it the origins of the crisis of “European public law,” but before him Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, later Hannah Arendt, and closer to us, the historians Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein.

Drawing “political” borders in the European sphere, which considered itself and attempted to appoint itself the *center of the world*, was also originally and principally a way to *divide up the earth*; thus, it was a way at once to organize the world’s exploitation and to export the “border form” to the periphery, in an attempt to transform the whole universe into an extension of Europe, later into “another Europe,” built on the same political model. This process continued until decolonization and thus also until the construction of the current international order. But one could say that in a certain sense it was never completely achieved—that is, the formation of independent, sovereign, unified, or homogeneous nation-states at the same time *failed* in a very large part of the world, or it was *thrown into question*, not only outside Europe but in certain parts of Europe itself.

This probably occurred for very profound reasons that we need to consider. It is possible that that form of “absolute” sovereignty of nation-states is not *universalizable* and that in some sense a “world of nations,” or even “united nations,” is a contradiction in terms. Above all, this connection among the construction of European nations, their stable or unstable “balance of power,” their internal and external conflicts, and the global history of imperialism resulted not only in the perpetuation of border conflicts but also in the demographic and cultural structure typi-

cal of European populations today, which are all *postcolonial* communities or, if you will, projections of global diversity within the European sphere—as a result of immigration but for other causes as well, like the repatriation of displaced peoples.

The second development that I would like to discuss concerns the evolution of the notion of a people, and it goes in the opposite direction from that of the preceding one, creating a strong tension that may become very violent on occasion. The historical insertion of populations and peoples in the system of nation-states and of their permanent rivalry affects *from the inside* the representation of these peoples, their consciousness of their “identity.”

In the work that I published in 1988 with Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*,<sup>8</sup> I used the expression “constitution of a *fictive ethnicity*” to designate this characteristic nationalization of societies and peoples and thus of cultures, languages, genealogies. This process is the very site of the confrontation, as well as of the reciprocal interaction, between the *two* notions of the people: that which the Greek language and following it all political philosophy calls *ethnos*, the “people” as an imagined community of membership and filiation, and *dēmos*, the “people” as the collective subject of representation, decision making, and rights. It is absolutely crucial to understand the power of this double-faced construction—its historical necessity, to some degree—and to understand its contingency, its existence relative to certain conditions.<sup>9</sup>

This construction resulted in the subjective interiorization of the idea of the border—the way individuals represent their place in the world to themselves (let us call it, with Hannah Arendt, their right *to be in the world*) by tracing in their imaginations impenetrable borders between groups to which they belong or by subjectively appropriating borders assigned to them from on high, peacefully or otherwise. That is, they develop cultural or spiritual nationalism (what is sometimes called “patriotism,” the “civic religion”).

But this construction also closely associates the democratic *universality* of human rights—including the right to education, the right to political expression and assembly, the right to security and at least relative social protections—with particular *national belonging*. This is why the democratic composition of people in the form of the nation led inevitably to systems of *exclusion*: the divide between “majorities” and “minorities” and, more profoundly still, between populations considered native and those considered foreign, heterogeneous, who are racially or culturally stigmatized.

It is obvious that these divisions were reinforced by the history

of colonization and decolonization and that in this time of globalization they become the seed of violent tensions. Already dramatic within each nationality, they are reproduced and multiplied at the level of the postnational or supranational community that the European Union aspires to be. During the interminable discussion over the situation of immigrants and “undocumented aliens” in France and in Europe, I evoked the specter of an apartheid being formed at the same time as European citizenship itself. This barely hidden apartheid concerns the populations of the “South” as well as the “East.”

Does Europe as a future political, economic, and cultural entity, possible and impossible, need a fictive identity? Through this kind of construction, can Europe give meaning and reality to its own citizenship—that is, to the new system of rights that it must confer on the individuals and social groups that it includes? Probably yes, in the sense that it must construct a representation of its “identity” capable of becoming part of both objective institutions and individuals’ imaginations. Not, however (this is my conviction, at least) in the sense that the *closure* characteristic of national identity or of the fictive ethnicity whose origin I have just described is as profoundly incompatible with the social, economic, technological, and communicational realities of globalization as it is with the idea of a “European right to citizenship” understood as a “right to citizenship in Europe”—that is, an expansion of democracy by means of European unification.

The heart of the aporia seems to me to lie precisely in the necessity we face, and the impossibility we struggle against, of collectively inventing a *new* image of a people, a new image of the relation between membership in historical communities (*ethnos*) and the continued creation of citizenship (*dēmos*) through collective action and the acquisition of fundamental rights to existence, work, and expression, as well as civic equality and the equal dignity of languages, classes, and sexes. Today every possibility of giving a concrete meaning to the idea of a European people and thus of giving content to the project of a democratic European state runs up against two major obstacles: the emptiness of every European social movement and of all social politics and the authoritarian establishment of a border of exclusion for membership in Europe. Unless these two obstacles are confronted together and resolved one by the other, this project will never happen.

The persistence of names is the condition of every “identity.” We fight for certain names and against others, to appropriate names (Europe, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Macedonia but also France, Great Britain, Germany). All

these battles leave traces, in the form of nostalgic longings and borders or utopias and transformational programs. Thus, the name of Europe—derived from distant antiquity and first designating a little region of Asia or Asia Minor—has been connected to cosmopolitan projects, to claims of imperial hegemony or to the resistance that they provoked, to programs dividing up the world and expanding “civilization” that the colonial powers believed themselves the guardians of, to the rivalry of “blocs” that disputed legitimate possession of it, to the creation of a “zone of prosperity” north of the Mediterranean, of a “great power in the twenty-first century.”

The difficulty for democratic politics is to avoid becoming enclosed in representations that have historically been associated with emancipatory projects and struggles for citizenship and have now become obstacles to their revival, to their permanent reinvention. Every identification is subject to the double constraint of the structures of the capitalist world economy and of ideology (feelings of belonging to cultural and political units). What is currently at stake does not consist in a struggle for or against European identity in itself. After the end of “real communism” and the taking of sides, the stakes revolve instead around the invention of a citizenship that allows us to democratize the borders of Europe, to overcome its interior divisions, and to reconsider completely the role of European nations in the world. The issue is not principally to know whether the European Union, too, will become a great military power, charged with guaranteeing a “regional order” or with “projecting” itself outward in humanitarian or neocolonial interventions; rather, it is whether a project of democratization and economic construction common to the East and West, the North and South, of the Euro-Mediterranean sphere will be elaborated and will gain the support of its peoples—a project that depends first on them. Europe impossible: Europe possible.