

For the Soul of Europe. Jacques Delors's Narrative Battle against Reaganomics

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Abstract

This article discusses Jacques Delors's narrative battle against the so-called "Reaganomics." The research is located within the larger context of postwar transatlantic relations and centers on the analysis on Jacques Delors's vision and rhetoric. Its main purpose is to examine how the former President of the European Commission has purposely nurtured Europe's exceptionalist self-perception and contributed to shape America's understanding of the Old World, either as model or antithesis. Discussing Delors's language, imagery and stories, penetrating the symbolic relevance, discursive dimension and ideological ambitions of his initiatives is indispensable to comprehend his long-lasting contribution to the formation of an "imagined" European community.

Keywords: Transatlantic Relations; European Integration; Narratives; Reaganomics; Jacques Delors.

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For its 2015 biannual Russell Kirk Lecture, the Heritage Foundation invited Roger Scruton to deliver a wide-ranging address and discuss Europe's contemporary "malaise." Speaking from the pulpit of one of the most influential American conservative think tanks, the British philosopher, public commentator and prolific author bemoaned the crisis and decline of European civilization. Beyond expounding the enduring causes of Europe's degeneration, the lecture served the purpose of urging the American audience to fully appreciate the perils of a similar destiny, were they to follow in Europe's footsteps.¹

The invitation to speak on the allegedly dramatic relapse of the Old Continent originated from a pressing concern of the Republican electorate. As David Azerrad said in his introduction to the lecture:

that we are on our way of becoming Europe has become axiomatic from many on the right. Dire warnings about American creeping Europeanization have become a staple of Republican fundraising letters, AM talk radio shows and conservative bloggers' view. Europe, once the cradle of Western civilization, has become a dirty word.²

While inviting the crowd to appreciate the existence of intra-European differences, he acknowledged the resilience of a widespread cliché: that countries across the Atlantic were now dreadfully perceived as an "undifferentiated, homogenous blob of socialism."³

The offshore observation of the many sins and fault lines of Old Europe is one of the most ancient and persistent tropes in the history of the United States.⁴ Hence, Professor Scruton's invitation to learn from his homeland's inherent flaws resonated with a longstanding tradition of American anti-Europeanism and tapped into a well-established mindset of conservative intellectuals.⁵

Since American independence, Europe has ceaselessly served as a counter-image against which the US has created and justified its identity. While Europe and America — as existent and imagined communities — have always stood in a relation of "eccentric continuity" to one another, as Tiziano Bonazzi famously argued, in this Atlantic divide Americans and Europeans alike have traditionally negotiated their identity and cultivated their self-awareness.⁶ Fascinated by this game of mirrors within the ever evolving "Euro-American labyrinth," my research on transatlantic relations has frequently focused on identity discourses and on the interplay of power, identity and culture in the definition of US and European foreign relations.⁷

More recently, I have worked on how the European Union has endeavored to craft forceful and enduring narratives in the attempt to define a sense of European distinctiveness and belonging across the continent and beyond. In particular, working on the personal papers of Jacques Delors, I have examined how the former President of the European Commission has purposely nurtured Europe's exceptionalist self-perception and contributed to shape America's understanding of the Old World, either as an inspiring social model or, more frequently, as that "undifferentiated, homogenous blob of socialism" that Azerrad recalled.

1. Roger Scruton, "The Future of European Civilization: Lessons for America," *A Russell Kirk Lecture at the Heritage Foundation's*, B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics, October 13, 2015, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-future-european-civilization-lessons-america>.

2. Scruton, "The Future of European Civilization."

3. Ibidem.

4. Antony G. Hopkins, *American Empire. A Global History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018; Daniel T. Rodgers, "Exceptionalism," in *Imagined Histories. American Historians Interpret the Past*, eds. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995; Ian Tyrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *The American Historical Review*, 4 (1991): 1031-55.

5. On the capacious and provocative concept of Anti-Europeanism, see Mary Nolan "Anti-Americanism and Anti-Europeanism," in *The New American Empire. A 21st Century Teach-In on U.S. Foreign Policy*, eds. Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn Young, New York: The New Press, 2005), 113-3; George H. Nash, "The Contemporary Conservative Intellectual Movement," *Modern Age*, 2 (1978): 171-76.

6. Tiziano Bonazzi, "Europa, Zeus e Minosse, ovvero il labirinto dei rapporti euro-americani," *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, 1 (2004): 3-24; Tiziano Bonazzi, *La Dichiarazione di Indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America*. Venezia: Marsilio, 2001.

7. By European, here, I mean primarily the leading western European countries and the members of the EU.

Contributing to the burgeoning historiographical debate on the narratives of European integration, this work moves beyond the existing literature as it locates the research within the larger context of postwar transatlantic relations and centers the analysis on Jacques Delors' vision and rhetoric.⁸ A reflection on the debate on the alleged "socialist" character of Europe is indeed inseparable from understanding the re-launching of the European Community during the Delors Commissions, a process epitomized by the 1992 Initiative and the adoption of the Single European Act, eventually crowned by the Maastricht Treaty.

A perusal of his personal papers shows how Delors framed his political activity, discussed his legacy as French Minister of Economics and Finance, and finally shaped his self-representation as a "social engineer" forcefully committed to an equitable economic order to be attained through a pragmatic, empirically-driven approach.⁹ At first a man on the defensive, he gradually became bolder, proactive and prone to Europeanize lessons, recipes, and prescriptions: to turn the reform of the Welfare State into an effort to forge an ambitious, comprehensive and allegedly distinctive "European Social Model" that in theory would challenge the American vision of modernity.

A first part of my research has primarily focused on Delors's conceptualization of the crisis of post-war economic order in the 1970s and the inner tension between the seemingly unquenchable neoliberal turn and his ambition to provide a renewed and updated form of socially embedded capitalism.¹⁰ A second part has examined the process of narrative construction that underpinned the actions and policies of the European Commission. Discussing Delors's language, imagery and stories, penetrating the symbolic relevance, discursive dimension and ideological ambitions of his initiatives is indeed instrumental to the appreciation of his long-lasting contribution to the formation of an "imagined" European community. The present contribution focuses specifically on this latter part.

1 Of European Exceptionalism

The politically and ideologically charged context of post-1970s American neoliberal ascendance provided a backdrop against which the often-contradictory quest for a European Social Model gained traction. The cultural and social movements, leaders, policies and institutional changes that emerged out of the Seventies — a crucial turning point in American and world history — fundamentally reshaped the United States by moving the nation out of New Deal and Cold War liberalism into a new conservative era.¹¹

This transition forged an intellectual environment conducive to the seemingly hegemonic affirmation of the tenets of monetarism, supply-side economics, deregulation. As curtailing the intrusions of the Federal Government and dismantling the welfare state became the mobilizing tropes of the Republican elites, social provisions were irrefutably lambasted as economically counterproductive, politically toxic and — perhaps more importantly — morally corrosive. In reality, policy retrenchment in critical domains of health care, income support and pension schemes, was extremely difficult

8. On this, see the influential publications by Wolfram Kaiser: "One narrative or several? Politics, cultural elites, and citizens in constructing a 'New Narrative for Europe,'" *National Identities*, 2 (2017): 215-30, and "Clash of Cultures: Two Milieus in the European Union's 'A New Narrative for Europe' Project," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 3 (2015): 364-77.

9. The epithet "social engineer" is Delors's. Jacques Delors Papers, Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Po (Paris) (hereinafter JD-CHSP), JD-CHSP-25, I-85, Gauche européenne. Presse variée, in A. Guatelli, "Intervista Presidente Delors al Corriere della Sera," 4 marzo 1985, 44. Commentators have popularized the definition. See, for instance, the article published by *Esprit* a month before Delors's investiture, JD-CHSP-10, Intervention de Jacques Delors. Presse, *Désignation à la Présidence de la Commission (DP)*, 84.

10. On this see Alessandra Bitumi, "An uplifting tale of Europe. Jacques Delors and the contradictory quest for a European Social Model in the Age of Reagan," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 3 (2018): 203-21.

11. On this see, among others, Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan, eds., *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2017; George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. New York: Basic Books, 1976; Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound. Making America Conservative in the 1970s*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008; Gil Troy, *Morning in America. How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

to achieve and, in most cases, the results were limited.¹² In his incisive account of such inconsistencies, Paul Pierson wrote:

The Reagan administration attempts to go on the offensive against this extensive system of retirement provision collapsed in the face of massive and unified resistance. Increasingly, the administration found itself on the defensive, forced to respond to a policy agenda not of its own choosing. Although some cutbacks resulted from trust-fund pressures, the Social Security program survived — indeed almost flourished — through a decade of budgetary austerity.¹³

Delors swiftly attacked and publicly exposed this conundrum.¹⁴ Yet, the flourishing network of conservative think tanks, philanthropic organizations, activists, intellectuals and pundits was relentlessly committed to reshape the public debate, creating and sustaining an impregnable narrative that eventually cornered the opponents.¹⁵ Individualism became the dominant language and frame for talking about society, economics, gender, history. The intellectual vigor of the neoliberal crusade variably resonated across the Atlantic as Margaret Thatcher launched her own attack against social democracy and neoliberal tendencies in postwar Dutch society gradually mutated into a key influence on the policy paradigms of the 1980s.¹⁶

In light of the transnational shrinkage of the “language of the social” and against the mounting pressure towards the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the deregulation of manufacturing and finance, small government and balanced budgets, Delors tried to resist the tide waging a battle of ideas which pivoted on two main assumptions. The first moved from an acute awareness of the pace and irreversibility of change in the international political economy. The second was rooted in a peculiar understanding and use (and abuse) of modern European history. For its overarching power, the United States loomed large in his mind: it was the mirror into which his Europe reflected itself; and the formidable counter-model against which his narrative of Europe would be refined.

Writing prose of exceptional fluency, narrating lucidly and arguing cogently, his pages and speeches were enlivened by rhetorical devices, piercing characterizations, striking metaphors, ironic wit and occasionally Manichean language.

One of the linchpins of Delors’s discourse was the incessant invitation to fully acknowledge the reality of the present challenges and the momentous change. The “shock of the global” had contributed to the acceleration of inescapable forms of interdependence, particularly visible in the technological revolution, that he deemed hazardous to ignore. Delors would therefore relentlessly insist on the irrevocability of globalization and the impossibility, for the European Community, to overlook the constraints it imposed. Potentially, the EC had the ability to choose how to govern the transformation of the world economy. It didn’t have the possibility to block it, let alone reverse it. Invoking the need for a realistic and dispassionate analysis, he then tackled the inherent tensions between the national welfare state and European integration, which — he argued — had dramatically intensified after the major transformation of the international political economy of the 1970s.¹⁷

12. Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era. A History of the 1980s*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan. A History, 1974-2008*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

13. Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 69.

14. JD-CHSP-25, I-85, 56.

15. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 39.

16. On Margaret Thatcher, particularly on the cultural, political and social impact of her economic policy and thinking, see Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho, eds., *Thatcher & After. Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010; Tony Judt, *Postwar*. New York: Penguin, 2005; *Tony Judt, Ill Fares the Land** (New York: Penguin, 2011); David Kavanah, *Thatcherism and British Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; Richard Vinen, *Thatcher’s Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010; Christian Wolmar, *Broken Rails: How Privatization Wrecked Britain’s Railways*. London: Aurum Press, 2011. From a broader perspective on Europe, see Judt, *Postwar*, ch. XVII.

17. Maurizio Ferrera, “Reconciling European Integration and the National Welfare State,” in *Democracy and the Welfare State. The Two Wests in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and Maurizio Vaudagna. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, 61-81.

Delors was fully aware that the legitimacy of the nation-state traditionally rested upon its capacity to shield, protect, support its citizen “from the cradle to the grave.” As the ultimate provider, and caretaker, the State was reluctant to surrender its sovereignty in this fundamental policy area, that had been a central tool in preserving the allegiance of its citizens since World War II. But he maintained that the inability of the nation-state to face the enhanced global competition in an age of financial crisis and technological development had exhausted the possibility for a social-democratic change at the national level, and therefore a much broader euro-Keynesian project had to see the light.¹⁸

Equally influenced by the Social-democratic heritage and Christian social thought, and in tune with the broader evolution of the French Socialist Party, Delors purposely eschewed what he called “the temptation to simplify.”¹⁹ The question was not whether the State should completely retreat or retain its prerogatives. The question was how it could be reformed to be rescued. The envisioned transformation pivoted on a specific understanding of the marketplace that — in his view — exemplified the irrefutable and widening transatlantic estrangement. And in such distance and difference lied the distinctiveness of European history.

Speaking at the opening session of the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1981, Ronald Reagan argued that what “united (the societies that had achieved the most spectacular, broad-based progress)” was “their willingness to believe in the *magic* of the marketplace. Everyday life confirms the fundamentally human and democratic ideal that individual effort deserves economic reward.”²⁰ “So let me speak plainly,” he continued: “We cannot have prosperity and successful development without economic freedom; nor can we preserve our personal and political freedoms without economic freedom.”²¹ The upshot was a call for reducing “the rate of government spending, honouring the commitment to balance the budget, reducing tax rates to encourage productive investment and personal savings, eliminating excessive government regulation.”²²

Far from objecting to the importance of economic competition and freedom of enterprise as sources of dynamism, Delors questioned instead the efficacy of the market as exclusive instrument of regulation, particularly at the macro-economic level. While in favor of rationalizing State intervention and supporting a more active labor market policy, he would also insist on the defense of crucial State functions: redistribution and provision of fundamental collective services.

What Reagan’s vision symbolized, from Delors’s perspective, was instead the ultimate triumph of an atomized, disaggregated, privatized society, ruled by individualism, logics of profit and unrestrained competition; built on loose societal bonds and dramatically deprived of the foundational value of solidarity. The marketplace needed a moral conscience, he warned the European public, or societies would peril.

When, in 1985, U.S. Secretary for Commerce Malcolm Baldrige suggested the Europeans should let themselves be inspired by Reaganomics, Delors harshly responded: “here, in Europe, we don’t want a savage economy.”²³ What he aimed at was a reinvigorated economic community that could function as a place of sustainable economic growth, managed technological advancement and, above all, an area of social harmony. His vision of European modernity was based on the support of individual as well as societal aspirations: sustained dialogue between management and labor; health and safety standards at

18. For a historical reflection on the transformation of social-democratic parties and thought see, among others, John Callaghan, *The Retreat of Social Democracy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000; Marc Lazar, ed., *La gauche en Europe depuis 1945. Invariants et mutations du socialisme européenne*. Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1996.

19. Cfr. “Les contradictions de la société industrielle: l’Etat face aux problèmes de la régulation économique et sociale,” JD-CHSP-9, 6.

20. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the Boards of Governors of the World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund,” September 29, 1981, *The American Presidency Program*, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-annual-meeting-the-boards-governors-the-world-bank-group-and-international>.

21. Reagan, “Remarks.”

22. Ibidem.

23. Delors reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, 23.4.1985, JD-CHSP-42. Also cited in Charles Grant, *Delors, Inside the House that Jacques Built*. London: Brealey Publishing, 1994.

work; recognition of the role of workers in the company; more and better free time, defense of natural environment, new urban planning, enhanced quality of collective services, equality of chances.

In the mid-1980s, for his outspoken condemnation of the main tenets of neoliberalism and for his vivid depiction of an alternative model, he was frequently portrayed as the European leader capable of finally resisting the temptation of Reagonomics. This picture, however, doesn't capture the many ambiguities and contradictions of the time. It tells one story, among many. The United States of Ronald Reagan remained, for Delors, a source of inspiration and a counter-model, a dubious hegemon but a needed one, a bluff and yet a threat. For the tremendous development of technological innovation, for the resources channeled to exploit its power and create new jobs, for the pace of growth and because it was a dynamic, young country, the United States was also to be admired.²⁴ Delors would relentlessly insist on Europe's urgent need to catch-up in the technological competition. While the US spending on research and development had increased by 30 per cent over the first five years of the decade, transnational European cooperation and investment were still very low. Delors's perception of what Servan-Schreiber had hinted at twenty years before — *le défi américain* — was pressing and the challenge had to be transformed into an opportunity to seize. However, what Europe needed was an endogenous response: "the solution does not lie in the imitation of foreign models, being them American or Japanese. Europe has the capacity to invent a specific path."²⁵ Despite Delors's admiration for the Silicon Valley, which he visited on his first trip to the US as President of the Commission, he made repeatedly clear that Europe's road to progress would lead elsewhere. In an interview with the *Washington Post* on April 21, 1985 he claimed: "We are in a different position and we also have different traditions."²⁶

The social attribute of this European tradition, pivotal in all his utterances, was ubiquitously pitted against the American model.²⁷ And it was presented as the linchpin of both the European project and heritage:

Poised between alienating, sterile, collectivism on the one hand and exuberant and socially intolerable individualism on the other, democratic Europe has been able to keep its balance, in a living humanism which does not belong to it or to you alone. We find this search for the best possible solution to the human problems of twentieth century society in Stockholm, Madrid, Bonn, Oslo, Vienna or Paris.²⁸

Evoking the wisdom and intellectual authority of one of the most influential and renown European historians — Fernand Braudel — Delors recalled how Europe was "committed to a shared destiny by Christian religion, rationalist thought, the development on its continent of science and technology and its taste for revolution and social justice."²⁹

As he would frequently assert, the fundamental concepts of social justice and equity are embedded in Europe's historical consciousness: "Europe is the land of the election of the balance between the society and the individual. Today, outside Europe this equilibrium is almost everywhere broken."³⁰

Appealing to this foundational history was part and parcel of a largely shared understanding of European civilization as deeply and irremediably shaped by its ancient past. As Delors urged his "fellow European citizens" to reconnect more fully and more proudly with their traditions, the New Right in the US was keenly projected towards a new American dawn that stood in sharp contrast to the

24. Jacques Delors, "Les contradictions de la société industrielle," JD-9, 54-66. *The Financial Times* (on 23.4.85) acknowledged Delors's praise for this specific aspect of American dynamism, JD-CHSP-24, 18.

25. JD-CHSP-32, *Forum, Expo de Liasons Sociales*, 3. Also JD- 55, I-87, 'Le Mal français: entretien avec Jacques Delors', *Autrement*, 1 (1987), 8-27.

26. As reported by A.F.P, Washington, on 22.4.1985, JD-CHSP-42, 96.

27. JD-CHSP-2, I-85, "Les orientations de la Commission de Communautés européennes."

28. *Speech by Jacques Delors to the Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, Strasbourg, September 26, 1989, II Commission Delors, JD-CHSP-522.*

29. *Ibidem.*

30. JD-CHSP-9, DP-84, 'Épreuve d'un article sur Jacques Delors', *La Vie* (n. p.), December 1984, 6.

Old world. Suggestively, the Republican national convention of 1980 had staged the poem “America For Me” by Henry van Dyke:

Tis fine to see the Old World, and travel up and down

Among the famous places and cities of renown,
To admire the crumbly castles and the statues of their kings —
But now I think I’ve had enough of antiquated things.

...

I know that Europe’s wonderful, yet something seems to lack;
The Past is too much with her, the people looking back.
But the glory of the Present is to make the Future free,
We love our land for what she is and what she is to be.
Oh, it’s home again, and home again, America for me!³¹

Throughout the 1980s, and well into the 1990s, many American conservative intellectuals used Europe as a negative model in the US culture wars.³² Antithetical understandings and representations of crucial issues like secularism, the welfare state, the environment, human rights, the role of international organizations and multilateral governance, global threats and developmental possibilities not only exacerbated a more general transatlantic divide but also shaped specific narratives that would have a lasting impact on conflicting and often competitive collective identities.³³

Delors’ insistence on the specificity of an inherently superior European social model seems to have decisively contributed to that perception of difference and distance.

Reflecting upon Reagan’s mantra, what he saw in the issue of deregulation and marked hostility to the State was:

an approach that leads to a very dangerous conception of the respective places of the individual and the society and the relationship between. It means turning the back to what has been the ethics of trade unionism and social democratic thought for years, which consists in saying: the individual has rights and duties, but society also has them. And the European civilization is the only one which, by its very foundations, guarantees a common, philosophical base that attaches great importance to the dialectical tension between the individual and the society; whereas in the United States the emphasis is on the exaltation of the individual, and in Japan, despite a very protective family life, it is the weight of society that appears preponderant.³⁴

In this sense, the Reagan revolution unequivocally provided Delors with a well-defined conceptual framework to think about what a united Europe should *not* be.³⁵ In the name of its identity, for the sake of its citizens and for the larger world.

The European vision of modernity had indeed an inherent global dimension and ambition. It stemmed from “a desire to remain present on the stage of history, whereas previously at Yalta, without consulting the Europeans, certain people had decided to divide Europe. We never accepted this,” Delors emphatically said at the Council of Europe only two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he continued, “you can see the changes in progress in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, the concomitance of these changes with the speeding up of European

31. Cited in in George H. Nash, *Reappraising the Right. The Past and Future of American Conservatism*. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2009, 7.

32. Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America. A History of the Culture Wars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

33. Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century. Europe and America 1890–2010*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, ch. 6.

34. JD-CHSP-12, DP-84, Jacques Delors, ‘Européens’ in *Cadres CFDT* (December 1984), 16.

35. On European Identity, see René Girault and Gérard Bossuat, ed., *Les Europe des Européens*. Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 1993; Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe, Idea, Identity, Reality*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995; Bo Stråth, ed., *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*. Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2000. On the US role as the “Other,” see Aurélie E. Gfeller, *Building a European Identity*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012.

integration since the Single European Act. All that gives us reason to set ourselves the target of overcoming the division of the Old World. In a word: we must wipe out Yalta!”³⁶

And do more, eventually. What Delors yearned to shape was a united Europe that would lead the way in developing a balanced international order that could prove the compatibility between economic dynamism and social justice.

Beyond championing an economic reform of the European Community to achieve this goal, Delors relentlessly advocated for the need to anchor policies to powerful narratives, because narratives underpin and bind communities, they inform and shape politics, they stir a sense of belonging and as such they gain relevance. The EC had to be seen not only as a set of practices, institutions and lobbies, but as an intellectual and cultural construction, a design of the mind evoked by visions, perceptions, and hopes.

The crucial function of this storytelling was to evoke people’s memories of the past, link them to their experience of the present and, above all, imagination of the future.³⁷ Far from being merely descriptive, his narrative aimed to produce ideas about cultural, socio-economic and political developments that seem significant, understandable, and acceptable to his audience.³⁸ Speaking the language of the social, in the age of neoliberal ascendance, was a way of signifying the European tradition and constructing a meaningful vision for the future.

To do so, Jacques Delors tapped into a longstanding and shared narrative of European primacy in the field of social policy that he interpreted as unrivaled, unchallenged and unique. Within this grand scheme, nuances, contradictions and contingency were somehow dispersed. A Manichean and almost a-historical reading of the development of social security and social rights apparently led to eclipsing the US experience and contribution to the field.

As historians have variously detailed, in the first phase of the history of modern welfare the Old Continent was the original laboratory of ideas. Daniel Rodgers has unveiled how American cosmopolitan progressives crisscrossed the Atlantic from the late Nineteenth century thorough the New Deal to learn from Europe and repair the damages of unbridled capitalism.³⁹ But the torch was then passed to the United States with Roosevelt’s “Four Freedom Address,” the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by Eleanor Roosevelt.⁴⁰ As US historian Maurizio Vaudagna fittingly recalls, “social security and social rights came to form an essential component of the wartime notion of the West, the Atlantic community, and democratic citizenship.”⁴¹

However, as the American “politics of growth” superseded the European emphasis on social security and as the rise of the New Right and the neoliberal revolution seemed destined to permanently transfigure the American social landscape, the US “radical” social moment sank into oblivion and it was almost muted in Delors’s narrative. More importantly, social policy transmuted from the lynchpin of Atlanticism into major source of discord and basis for rival exceptionalist discourses.

Within an irredeemably fractured West, bolstered by a stronger awareness of its past, Europe could now potentially surge to embody a new polity. Using a metaphor tellingly cherished also by the French Minister of Culture — and strong critic of US neo-imperialism — Jack Lang, Europe was committed to avoid the establishment of a world order similar to that of “a fox in the henhouse.”⁴²

36. Speech by Jacques Delors to the Council of Europe (26 September 1989), accessible at https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2003/4/9/59175ca0-1907-41bb-bae0-770c9612899e/publishable_en.pdf, last accessed October 9, 2020

37. I borrow the definition of narrative from Odile Chenal, “Continent of Broken Dreams?,” in *The Making of European Narratives*, eds. Odile Chenal and Bas Snelders. Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation, 2012.

38. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006; Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; Wolfram Kaiser, “Clash of cultures.”

39. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossing: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2000.

40. Maurizio Vaudagna, “Historians Interpret the Welfare State, 1975-1995,” in *Democracy and the Welfare State*, 36.

41. Maurizio Vaudagna, “Social Protection and the Promise of a Secure Future in Wartime Europe and America,” in *Defining the Atlantic Community: Culture, Intellectuals, and Policies in the mid-20th Century*, ed. Marco Mariano, London: Routledge, 2015, 92.

42. On the significance of this speech and more broadly on Jack Lang, see — among others — Laurent Martin, *Jack Lang, une vie entre culture et politique*. Paris: Complexe, 2008, and Richard Kuisel, *The French Way. How France embraced and rejected*

It is necessary to reach dynamic compromises ... not only to defend our legitimate interests at the industrial, agricultural, and financial level but also to contribute to an international economic system different from the one of the “fox in the henhouse.” We must demonstrate, through our proposals, through our exemplar activity, that efficiency and justice can go hand in hand ... Equality doesn’t mean only rewarding entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to take risks; it also means nurturing an embracing society, mindful of equality of chances ...⁴³

More than thirty years into the single market, in the midst of seismic shifts within the EU and beyond, one is left to wonder what is left of Delors’s championing of Social Europe. The current, blatant state of crisis surely exposes the limits of the past and it imposes a critical reflection on the shortcomings of the integration process.

While the institutional architecture and the economic reforms put in place in the 1980s proved inadequate to deal with the challenges of an ever-integrated world, the tenets of Delors’s vision seem nonetheless to endure. As Timothy Garton-Ash observed:

Like no other continent, Europe is obsessed with its own meaning and direction. Idealistic and teleological visions of Europe at once form, legitimate and are themselves informed and legitimated by the political development of something called the European Union. The name ‘European Union’ is itself a product of this approach, for a union is what the EU is meant to be, not what it is.⁴⁴

While not inventing this approach, Delors has certainly championed it. His intellectual construction contributed to draw the boundaries of Europe’s distinctiveness; it turned the *imagined* Europe into a project for the modern future: Europeans may not be living in a superior, egalitarian, cohesive and morally commendable society, but they are bound by a mission to move towards it. This is what defines them, he claimed, as a “civilization.”

American Values and Power. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

43. JD-CHSP-2, “Les orientations de la Commission de Communautés européennes,” 7. The text was presented by Delors at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, on January 14, 1985. Delors often used the metaphor. See, for instance, JD-CHSP-2, II-85, “Les orientations de la Commission de Communautés européennes,” 5. See also Intervention au ‘Grand Jury’ de RTL - “Le Monde” (03/02), 59, the same metaphor is used to reinforce his opposition to any form of social dumping.

44. Timothy Garton-Ash, “Europe’s Endangered Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2 (1998): 51-65.

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