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THE UNCERTAIN STATE(S) OF EUROPE?



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Abstract

Recent representations of the European project have, more often than not, characterized it as ‘uncertain’, ‘weak’, and even ‘indeterminate’. In this article, I look to the political – and geopolitical – ramifications of such understandings, in particular as regards Europe’s role in the world. I remark, especially, on the geographical imaginations which underpin such critiques: highly normative assumptions regarding political territoriality and ‘power’ in the international

arena. I argue that such geographical imaginations fundamentally miss the radical transformations taking shape at and well beyond Europe’s borders, thus failing to recognize the emergence of the EU as a very new sort of international actor.

KEY WORDS ★ Europe ★ geopolitics ★ international intervention ★ power ★ territoriality

Introduction

If you put the words ‘Europe’ and ‘crisis’ into the Internet search engine Google, over four million entries come up. Newspapers have used them together so often that they are almost interchangeable: on any day in the last fifty years there have been stories of divisions, failure to meet targets, diplomatic wrangles, a perpetual sense of failure. (Leonard, 2005: 4)

The European project is in an uncertain state.¹ Or at least this is the impression that emerges from many popular depictions of Europe today. But, as we well know, all representations of space, all geographical imaginations, have political effects: representing Europe² as ‘uncertain’, ‘complicated’, ‘contradictory’, even ‘messy’, holds important political – and geopolitical – consequences.

This article focuses on some of the ways in which the European project is made present today and, specifically, on the politics and geopolitics of its representation. The title is not accidental: I would like to draw attention to the notion of uncertainty in particular because it is in the grammar of ‘weakness’, ‘indeterminacy’ – and ‘uncertainty’ – that many (if not most) contemporary critiques of Europe are articulated, for clear political and geopolitical reasons.

I begin my analysis by assessing the political uses of constructing European uncertainty as a ‘problem’ for Europe: first, as regards the process of European

integration, and second, a propos Europe’s role in the world. I then try to spatialize these arguments, remarking upon their (not so) implicit geographical imaginations: the highly normative and normalizing assumptions regarding territory, sovereignty and identity and the necessary relations between these same. What I argue, finally, is that such geographical imaginations miss the potential of Europe’s ‘uncertainty’; they ignore the perhaps ‘quiet’³ but truly revolutionary geopolitical transformations taking shape within, at, and well beyond Europe’s boundaries.

An indeterminate identity: accusations, geopolitical and identity

Alongside disparaging assessments of Europe’s ‘democratic deficit’ and its over-bureaucratization, the main focus of popular – but also academic – critiques of the process of European integration in the Anglophone world has lain with Europe’s ‘weakness’, its failure to articulate a strong identity, a clearly delineated vision of ‘what it is’ – and where it is going.⁴

The debates that accompanied the process of the European Constitution’s elaboration and approval are quite illustrative in this sense. While from some

on the Right came accusations about the Constitutional Convention's reluctance to clearly specify Europe's 'civilizational' identity and boundaries (particularly disappointing to those hoping to see within the Constitution the codification of a 'Christian Europe'), many on the European Left (in the UK, but also in continental Europe) also expressed dissatisfaction with the Convention's perceived unwillingness to 'take a stand': in particular, its unwillingness to clearly state the 'values and principles' unique to the European social model.⁵ An opinion piece in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* in May 2004, right in the midst of the negotiations, expressed just such sentiments:

What's the EU for, beyond free trade? Old reasons for European unity have gone. Jean Monnet's talk of keeping the peace after a millennium of European war sounds as archaic as gas masks ... Is it surprising people are apathetic or hostile when they see nothing but nit-picking and bartering between men in suits in faraway Brussels? ... At the heart of Europe is a void, mitigated only by greed. The EU always needed a political purpose beyond trade: without that, things start to fall apart. (Toynbee, 2004: 27)

The assessments in the aftermath of the French 'No' were similar in spirit. In a commentary that appeared in a number of European newspapers, Jean-Paul Fitoussi (2005: 17) argued that it was precisely the 'weak' language of the Constitutional text that alienated voters on the Left: even the Constitution's most ardent proponents 'highlighted only its limits and imperfections', he noted. In essence, the French and later Dutch voters were asked to 'grant constitutional dignity [and] solemnly approve' a text that 'simply delineated a series of already existing institutional arrangements', but 'created nothing new'.

What is particularly interesting is that critiques from *both* ends of the political spectrum were equally marked by an allergy to the Draft Constitution's ambivalent, 'weak', territoriality and what were seen as its 'weak' and ambivalent values. *Both* sets of critiques were equally marked by a cartographic understanding of (European) sovereignty and identity (the implicit privileging of what James Anderson (2006) terms 'abstract models in absolute space') – and by the presumption that a valid and valuable political project (for Europe) is

necessarily territorial and univocal, driven by 'strong' values and demarcated by clear boundaries. Such critiques often slid into contradiction, particularly on the Left, which on the one hand bemoaned Europe's identity and geographical 'ambivalence' and 'weakness' ('Europe's unwillingness to clearly define itself'), while at the same time condemning the EU's increasingly 'hard' territorializations of security and identity (the consolidation of a 'Fortress Europe' in response to the pressures of immigration and real or presumed terrorist threats). The confines of Europe were at once not clear enough and yet all too potent.

It is important to note that this geographical assumption draws on a long line of academic critique levelled at what we could term 'aspirational' or 'ideal' renditions of the European project, of which the Constitutional Convention was just the most recent and visible expression. Indeed, some of the most common arguments that have been aimed over the years at Jürgen Habermas's (1998; 2001) theorization of a (European) 'constitutional patriotism' or his evocation of Europe as an 'area of solidarity among strangers'⁶ are that such visions are 'dry' and 'dull', lacking the necessary iconic and 'spiritual' props that could inspire popular allegiance and grant the European project the necessary legitimacy.⁷

The fact that Europe's 'indeterminacy' provoked such widespread annoyance – on both sides of the political spectrum – is curious. What such annoyance revealed is the confusion engendered – both politically and conceptually – by the lack of a clear and direct correspondence between sovereignty, identity and territory. Europe's 'undefinability' – or, better yet, Europe's unwillingness to define itself – was interpreted as *in-existence* or, at best, lack of *purposeful existence*.

Intimations of the 'weakness' of the European project have not only come from within, however – nor have they only concentrated on the failings of Europe's self-definition. Indeed, the most forceful accusations of Europe's incapacity have been focused in the geopolitical realm – on Europe's (willing) powerlessness as an international actor.

One of the most often cited characterizations of European 'weakness' has been that of Robert Kagan, with his vision of a 'post-modern, Kantian' Europe opposed to a 'Hobbesian United States'. Kagan's views were first elaborated in a highly influential piece

entitled 'Power and Weakness' in the American foreign policy journal *Policy Review* in June 2002, published in slightly revised form in 2003 as a short volume, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*. Kagan's argument focused, ostensibly, on the increasingly evident disparity between the American and European worldviews, particularly with regard to the conduct of international affairs. But Kagan's geographies of power and weakness evoked, even more importantly, broader understandings of the ways in which the post-9/11 world 'works' – and the proper place of America and Europe within the new global temperie:

It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world. On the all-important question of power – the efficacy of power, the morality of power, the desirability of power – American and European perspectives are diverging. Europe is turning away from power, or to put it a little differently, it is moving beyond power into a self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation. It is entering a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Kant's 'Perpetual Peace.' The United States, meanwhile, remains mired in history, exercising power in the anarchic Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable and where true security and the defence and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might. (Kagan, 2002: 1)

In Kagan's narrative, but also in the recent work of other neo-conservative writers and analysts like Thomas Barnett (2004; 2005), as well as in the pronouncements of key figures in the Bush Administration (Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, most notably), 'Old' Europe has figured as a heavily feminized subject, weak and hesitant, unwilling to commit to action, privileging (empty) rhetoric over military strength, ambivalent and loath to take a strongly moral stance. Decisive action and bombs are inscribed as the grammar of virile identity, marking a subject conscious of his (sic) historical mission, as Robert Kagan would argue – while diplomacy and dialectic are the attributes of the weak, 'postmodern' self, isolated in her opulent paradise.

Not only at the start of the Iraqi War but also throughout the ongoing military occupation of

Afghanistan and Iraq, European geopolitical 'softness' continued – and continues – to be depicted by some neo-conservative commentators (in both America and Europe) as tantamount to 'appeasement', to colluding with the enemy.⁸ In such rhetoric, again, European 'weakness' is heavily feminized: in the best of terms, Europe's indecision or lack of action is presented as cacophony and confusion; in the worst, European deliberation and diplomacy (most recently vis a vis Iran) makes it a 'whore', 'sleeping with the enemy' (as Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci had graciously characterized the efforts of European institutions on a number of occasions; for a discussion, see Bialasiewicz, 2006).

A 'power in weakness'?

... the problem is not Europe: it is our outdated understanding of power. (Leonard, 2005: 2)

I have hinted briefly here at some discursive constructions of European 'weakness', both from within as well as from outside Europe, noting how such depictions are driven by a profound geographical assumption – but also by geopolitical necessity. But is Europe really as 'weak' as it is made out to be?

In a booklet published at the end of 2005 by the DEMOS think-tank (enticingly titled 'Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century'), British foreign policy analyst Mark Leonard turns Robert Kagan's characterization on its head, outlining in a number of episodes what he terms Europe's 'Power of Weakness'. Leonard's analysis is quite rudimentary, at times even naïve in its geographical analysis, but it does point to some very interesting geopolitical and geo-economic developments. Countering neo-conservative readings of the perilous post-9/11 world where only might makes right and echoing the recent theorizations of scholars such as Joseph Nye (2003; 2004), Leonard points to the inherent weakness of 'hard' American power:

The overblown rhetoric directed at the 'American Empire' misses the fact that the US reach – militarily and diplomatically – is shallow and narrow. The lonely superpower can bribe, bully, or impose its will almost

anywhere in the world, but when its back is turned, its potency wanes. (Leonard, 2005: 3)

What he characterizes as Europe's 'invisible power' is quite different: 'the strength of the EU, conversely, is broad and deep: once sucked into its sphere of influence, countries are changed forever' (2005: 5):

... when a country like Russia signs the Kyoto Protocol on green-house gas emissions in order to smooth relations with the European Union; when Poland reverses decades of practice to introduce constitutional protection for ethnic minorities to be allowed to join the EU; when an Islamist government in Turkey abandons its own party's proposals for a penal code that makes adultery a crime punishable by law so as not to attract the ire of Brussels; or a right-wing Republican administration swallows hard and asks the UN for help over Iraq – then we need to question our definitions of power and weakness. (Leonard, 2005: 5)

Europe's power cannot be measured in military spending or the global reach of its forces, he argues: it is a 'transformative power' that 'works in the long term and is about reshaping the world rather than winning short-term tussles' (Leonard, 2005: 5).⁹

What really gives Europe its strength according to Leonard (2005: 6), is its 'power of attraction': 'Europe doesn't change countries by threatening to invade them: its biggest threat is having nothing to do with them at all.' This is obviously true for states hoping to join the European 'club' – but Europe's 'power of attraction' holds a much wider sway. The European Project is, in Leonard's words, 'simply irresistible': the EU's unique synthesis of capitalist economy with the stability and welfare offered by its oft maligned social-democratic model increasingly provides a much more attractive – and viable – alternative to the American Dream.

Again, I choose to cite Leonard's arguments at length not because they are particularly theoretically compelling or novel but rather because they provide an interesting window into *an alternative set of geopolitical readings of the European project*, quite different from the Europe imagined by neo-conservative commentators. Indeed, Leonard is not the only popular writer to extol Europe's new found prominence: a very similar argument was made a couple of years back by Jeremy Rifkin (2004), noting the waning attraction (and success) of the American model and the rapidly rising power and global reach

of what he terms 'the European Dream'; and, most recently, by 'Third-way' guru Anthony Giddens (2006; as well as the edited collection with Diamond and Liddle, 2006). Now, the depictions offered here of Europe's 'seductive power' and its 'fatal attraction' may be somewhat cinematic (and similarly gendered as Kagan's and Rumsfeld's characterizations of a weak and feminized European subject), but the transformations they point to *are* truly revolutionary and evoke a very different vision of Europe's present and future role in the world.

In order to begin to reflect on some of the geopolitical effects of such understandings, it is useful to draw attention to one recent event that, I believe, palpably illustrates Europe's 'power of attraction' – but also the ways in which Europe's 'invisible power' is fundamentally transforming relations between sovereignty, identity and territory and, indeed, the scales of politics.

On 21 May 2006, the republic of Montenegro held a referendum for independence. With a turnout of 87 percent of the population, 55 percent voted in favour of independence and secession from Serbia. On 3 June, Montenegro formally became Europe's newest state, 15 years after the secession of Slovenia and Croatia initiated the break-up of Yugoslavia in June 1991.

What makes the Montenegrin vote unique – and worthy of attention – is the role of the EU. First of all, the conditions for the referendum's validity – the specification of the sufficient turn-out rate (superior to 50%) and the threshold for approval (55%) – were set by the European Union; something unprecedented for Europe, but also unprecedented under international law (I will say more on the implications of this). Second, the Montenegrin motivations for independence from Serbia were not couched predominantly in the language of national distinction and the affirmation of state sovereignty: *the key argument for independence was Montenegro's entry into the European Union*. As the 'yes' camp argued, as long as it remained linked to Serbia, Montenegro 'was being held responsible for problems that had nothing to do with it', threatening its rapprochement with Europe. Indeed, Brussels' decision to suspend accession negotiations with the State of Serbia-Montenegro in the spring of 2006 – following the expiration of the 30 April deadline set for Serbia to surrender the Serb General Ratko Mladic – was key in spurring on the referendum.

What is more, as many local political leaders contended (including Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic), Montenegro:

... felt that it was being held hostage by Serbia on an economic level as well. Over the last few years, [Montenegro] has launched a series of economic and social reforms which contrast greatly with the lack of progress on the part of neighbouring Serbia. (cited in Deloy, 2006: 3)

As Djukanovic argued on the eve of the vote, 'by settling the referendum dilemma, Montenegro will open up horizons for its dynamic integration into Europe' (cited in Deloy, 2006: 1). The EU shared this understanding: as part of its specifications for the referendum, Union institutions had accepted that if Montenegro voted for independence, the current joint state of Serbia-Montenegro could pursue EU membership separately. On 29 May, a week after the vote, Prime Minister Djukanovic travelled to Brussels. Following a meeting with Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, it was announced that the newly independent state could move faster in EU integration terms than Serbia: '[I]f negotiations continue as professionally and effectively as so far, we should be able to conclude the negotiations by the end of the year on the Stabilization and Association Agreement' (cited in Krasniqi, 2006).¹⁰ The EU would now begin work on a separate SAA package for Podgorica, focused on 'disentangling the two states'.

Brussels' support of the referendum process was not free from criticism. Besides the pro-Serb 'no' camp in Montenegro, some EU politicians also questioned the validity – and legality – of the vote. In the run-up to the referendum, Danish Liberal MEP Karin Riis-Jørgensen argued that the EU's involvement in the question was highly problematic:

We should not forget that the EU community is of sovereign states. That also means that the EU should not engage in a nation's internal business. It is completely dissatisfactory that the EU has involved itself in Montenegro's referendum for independence. (cited in Spongenberg, 2006)

But such criticisms – as well as the letter of complaint lodged by Montenegrin pro-unionists lamenting 'voting irregularities' – were dismissed by the EU's senior diplomat, Javier Solana: 'The high

turnout and massive international involvement provided full legitimacy for the entire process. For us, the question of the referendum is over' (cited in Krasniqi, 2006).¹¹

It is useful to briefly consider the geographical – and geopolitical – implications of this event. First, upon what legal basis did the EU set the specifications for the validity of the referendum? There exist no guidelines under international – or European – law that would grant the Union the prerogative of deliberating on the juridical validity of such an exercise within a sovereign state that is not part of the Union or, in this case, a *portion* of a sovereign state that is not part of the Union. Nor are there precedents that would grant the EU the faculty of adjudicating the 'success' of such an operation; that is, the correspondence of the referendum's result to some 'popular feeling' of national distinction. But, as it came to pass, Montenegro declared its independence under EU rules and with the EU's blessing; albeit implicitly, Europe deliberated on Montenegrin claims to sovereignty. Second, this is perhaps the first time ever that Europe's 'power of attraction' has been cited as – and became the motor for – a declaration of national independence. Certainly, pragmatic considerations played a part (as Montenegrin political leaders themselves admitted); nonetheless, 'Europe' in this instance became a conduit to national self-determination.

Whether the Montenegrin experience is indicative of a new role for Europe in the Balkans is an open question, however. The deliberations surrounding the status of Kosovo and proposals for its independence from Serbia following the publication of the United Nations Ahtisaari report in early February 2007 have been much more fraught with difficulties, both for the still-persistent effects of the recent conflict, but also the strong stand taken by *other* international actors – notably, Russia. The prospect of European integration is undoubtedly important for Serbia, but whether it is 'seductive' enough to swallow an EU–UN-imposed solution for Kosovo is another story (see the comments in Beunderman, 2007; Goldirova, 2007a; Rettman and Beunderman, 2007; for a broader analysis of the EU's role in the Balkans, see Dahlman, 2006). Nonetheless, the resolution of Serbia's three-month-long electoral deadlock in May 2007 has been credited to EU pressures and, in

particular, the 'carrot' of re-opening the Stabilization and Association Agreement. The new coalition government – formed by the Democratic Party of President Boris Tadic, the Democratic Party of Serbia of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and the neo-liberal G17 Plus Party – excludes the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, whose leader had previously been designated as the Speaker of the country's parliament. Brussels was quite clear in its message: 'pro-Western Serbia will see rewards', Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn argued in a written statement just days before the 14 May deadline for new elections; 'once a new government is formed, Serbia's path to the EU will be revitalised immediately'. Serbia's leaders, he argued, must 'choose a European future, instead of letting the country fall back to its nationalist past' (Rehn, cited in Goldirova, 2007b).

The 'Balkan question' is of vital importance to the EU's self-definition as an international actor – if only to exorcize the ghosts of Srebrenica. But what we need to consider is that the EU's influence does not just stop at its doorstep, in its immediate 'neighbourhood'. In one way or another, almost 2b people (i.e. one-third of the world's population) live in what a paper published by the European Central Bank in 2002 described as the 'Euro Time Zone': Europe's extended 'zone of influence', a space to different degrees penetrated and transformed by the European project (Mazzafero et al., 2002). This 'Euro Time Zone' does not consist only of the 460m+ citizens of the EU-27 – it extends to a broader zone of almost 400m people who share land and sea borders with the Union in the western Balkans, Central Asia and the southern shores of the Mediterranean and, in part, to over 900m in the Middle East and Africa, areas of the world which are also closely linked to the European Union as their most important trading partner and biggest source of credit, foreign investment and aid. And, as Leonard (2005: 6) points out, 'while every US company, embassy, and military base is a terrorist target, Europe's relative invisibility allows it to extend its global reach without the same provocation'.¹²

Following Leonard's argument, it is not only a question of economic influence. Europe's economic reach is also a *cultural and political reach*; part of that 'transformative power' that he as well as Rifkin and Giddens allude to. Indeed, European aid and

European economic involvement most often come linked to certain preconditions and can have significant 'transformative' effects: whether in the sphere of human development and human rights, or in the realm of environmental protection.¹³ It would be naïve, of course, to ascribe only 'positive' intentions and effects to Europe's role – in its dealings with the developing world, the EU often pursues its own purposes and agendas like any other global power. But with flows of €46b a year (with €6b channelled directly through the Commission), the EU itself is currently the world's biggest donor of official development assistance (ODA)¹⁴ – a role that is set to be further strengthened in the coming years, with the aim to provide 66 percent of all ODA by 2010¹⁵ (for a critical analysis of the geopolitics of EU aid, see Sebban, 2007, as well as the reports of the Eurostep Network, accessible at [www.eurostep.org]; for a more positive analysis of the EU's potential role see Moss and Rackowski, 2007).

The uses of indeterminacy¹⁶

I could cite many more examples of the EU's growing international presence/influence, but more interesting still are the wider implications of this shift: the new possibilities, the new geographies opened up by such 'uncertain' understandings of the European project and its inconsistent – or, to cite Edgar Morin (1990), 'incontinent' – relations between territory, sovereignty and belonging; new geographies which fundamentally challenge neo-conservative renditions of European 'weakness'.

In order to begin to think about the ways in which Europe's 'transformative power' draws *precisely* upon the 'weakness' of its imagined nexus between territory, sovereignty and belonging, I would like to return again to the question of 'rights' and 'values' and, specifically, Europe's *self*-imagination as a guarantor and conveyor of certain rights and values. Over recent years, numerous public figures – intellectuals as well as politicians – have argued that the European Union's unique contribution could and should come in assuring the respect and protection of certain basic human rights *not only within its boundaries* (among others, Balibar, 2003; 2004; Derrida, 1991; 2003; Habermas, 2004; Padoa-Schioppa, 2004; Steiner, 2006; Todorov,

2003). Such calls have been quite distinct from the rhetoric of democracy promotion and the (often associated) doctrine of 'humanitarian intervention',¹⁷ espoused by the United States (and, to a large extent, the UK) for over a decade now. In such understandings, what makes the EU's specified geopolitical role different is that it is seen as *emerging from an extension of its understanding of itself*; it is an extension (albeit temporary and incomplete) of the sphere of European rights, *not a remedy for distant others*. It is precisely in this that the 'official' EU imaginary presents itself as profoundly different from the understanding of the world operated by the current American Administration. In today's neo-conservative geographies, the world beyond the United States (certainly, the world beyond the US/European 'Core', to use Barnett's terminology) is a world governed by a Hobbesian law of the jungle (see the discussion in Elden and Bialasiewicz, 2006). As such, it is essentially a *space free of law*; a space where the US as global hegemon can (and indeed must) 'live by a double standard' (Kagan, 2002).¹⁸

It is important to be clear about the distinction operated here. In such understandings, Europe's difference is not only articulated through an attachment to 'legalism' and diplomacy (the supposed mark of its 'weakness' and 'uncertainty' in neo-conservative readings of the European project). Europe's difference does not come merely from its preoccupation with the law but the fact that it allows for *claims to (its) law to come from – and extend to – also putatively non-European spaces, subjects, and events*. As Emmanuel Decaux (2004) has argued, in such a conception, international law becomes simply an extension of internal/national law: the application of law – and thus the safe-guarding of certain rights and values – *become fundamentally decoupled from territory*.¹⁹ Thierry Chopin (2005) has termed this understanding an 'international constitutionalism', standing in clear contrast to the 'national constitutionalism' driving, for instance, American conceptions of the protection of liberty and democracy (a similar distinction is also made by Rosanvallon, 2005; see also Buhler, 2003).

I close with one more recent example that illustrates well the (at least perceived) *juridical uniqueness of the European space of rights*. In the spring of 2006, the families of Polish soldiers executed by Stalin's secret police in Katyn, in one of the Second World War's most infamous massacres,

announced that they will take Russia to the European Court of Human Rights in order to force a full disclosure of information about the killings. The massacre, perpetrated in what is today Belarus, was personally ordered by Stalin and took the lives of over 21,000 Polish officers, prominent intellectuals, writers, journalists, teachers and aristocrats. The victims were buried in mass graves, and the USSR blamed the killings on the Nazi occupiers, going as far as reburying the bodies and bulldozing evidence in order to deflect the blame from the NKVD (Stalin's secret police). Katyn has long been a prominent marker of Polish suffering during the Second World War, but also of the humiliation of national memory in the 40 years of communism when this – as with many other crimes perpetrated by the Soviets before, during and after the war – was simply unspeakable. Today, Europe is being asked to extend its juridical reach into time and space, to bring justice to events that took place more than 60 years ago. Now, the political (and geopolitical) motivations driving such claims are certainly important; what matters, though, is that it is the EU that is seen as the proper locus for the articulation of such demands; demands which draw upon the idea of Europe's 'reputation' as a 'force for good' (Prodi, 2004).

The alternative geographies – and geopolitics – made possible by this understanding of Europe are worthy of our close attention, if only because such 'ideal' imaginaries increasingly inform the EU's 'real' actions in the international arena. I will cite one final example. The summer of 2006 witnessed the deployment of an unprecedented EU–UN peace-keeping mission, destined to halt the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. What made this mission different from past efforts (French troops have, after all, been in Lebanon since 1978 as part of the original UNIFIL mission) is that this time around, 'Europe' acted in concerted fashion, at least overtly.²⁰ For the first time, the EU emerged as a key geopolitical player in the Mediterranean, and put into action a very different conception of international intervention.²¹ For the first time – certainly for the first time in such outright fashion – the United States was no longer seen as the privileged interlocutor in Middle Eastern affairs, as both Lebanese and Israeli political leaders called explicitly for European involvement. What is more, the extraordinary council of EU foreign ministers,

meeting together with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Brussels on 25 August 2006 gave the go-ahead to an intervention force that had as its purpose a very different conception of 'stabilization' to that of recent American exercises in world ordering. It was to attempt to mediate with the variety of 'territorial' actors engaged in the conflict – the states of Lebanon and Israel but also Hezbollah, whose disarmament was explicitly *not* in the remit of the new UNIFIL force. (For an assessment of the 'success' of the mission, see the comments in Solana, 2006.)

Yet despite the novel nature of the EU–UN initiative, it is curious how once again the impression conveyed – by the English-language press – was of squabbling, doubts and (again) the unwillingness to 'commit' (e.g. *The Economist*, 2006 in the days preceding the final agreement). Rather than emphasizing the novelty and ambition of the mission, what readers got, once again, was derision of the 'weakness' of Europe, with frequent parallels to the Balkan quagmire of the early 1990s (again, *The Economist's* surmise being a case in point). That the European 'squabbling' was a process of deliberation and debate within a community of sovereign states was largely overlooked.²²

But, even more importantly, *also* largely obscured amid accusations of confusion and political horse-trading was the European stance: in particular, the broad-based refusal on the part of leading European states (Germany, France and Italy most visibly) to buy into the hard-territorial interpretation of the conflict espoused by Israel and the United States. Indeed, what was most valuable in European diplomatic efforts in the Israeli–Lebanese conflict was the attempt to *decouple political subjectivity from territory*; the attempt to engage with Lebanon as a complex political space.²³ What is more, since the end of the hostilities, the role of the UNIFIL force has been reframed as just *one* part of a broader EU strategy aimed at 'the long-term recovery of Lebanon': at the International Donor Conference on Support for Lebanon held in Paris on 25 January 2007, EU military involvement in Lebanon was 'enhanced' by a new European Neighbourhood Action Plan that will commit a 500m assistance package over the next three years (European Commission, 2007; Solana, 2007). Again, unique here are not only the mechanics of aid transfer and implementation but, above all, the geographical imaginations that frame it. As part of

the broader 'European Neighbourhood', Lebanon is a 'European space' – and a 'European problem'; not a 'far-off other'. Now, much could be said about the distinct geopolitical visions framing the EU's Neighbourhood Policy, but I do not have space here to consider these in detail (for two excellent analyses, see Dahlman, 2006 and Jones, 2006). What is key to note is that the EU's 'external dynamic' is fundamentally reconfiguring political space at the Union's borders and well beyond, extending EU influence (both formally and informally) to an ever-expanding 'ring of friends'. As Anderson (2006) notes, it is probably too early to speculate on the 'success' or even final shape of what he terms Europe's 'malleable empire' that is coming into being; it is important, however, *to recognize its emergence*.

Here, I believe the story of the EU's involvement in Lebanon is particularly illustrative and should make us think carefully about the two issues I raised at the outset of this article: first, the geopolitical reasons driving representations of European 'uncertainty'; second, our very definitions of 'power' and 'weakness'. As regards Lebanon, it is curious how Anglo-American criticisms of Europe's (re?)discovered role in the Middle East came at a moment in which the American presence in the region was entirely discredited, as was the (territorial) interpretation of the conflict given by the Bush – and in large part also Blair – Governments. The emergence of the EU as a new interlocutor in the region comes with a whole new set of competing geopolitical imaginations that run directly counter to the 'Clash of Civilizations' scenarios sustaining the War on Terror. Whether it be the idea of a broader Mediterranean 'neighbourhood', or a formal foreign policy initiative such as the 'Alliance of Civilizations' spearheaded in 2005 by Spanish Prime Minister Jose Rodriguez Zapatero together with Turkish Premier, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Kofi Annan,²⁴ any such initiative focuses on cooperation and integration (if not cooptation); and gives to Europe a pre-eminent role (for a discussion of some of these initiatives and the 'difference they make', see Balibar, 2004; Balibar and Lévy-Leblond, 2006).

What about our definitions of geopolitical 'power' and 'weakness'? These, like all geographical imaginations, are 'specifications of political reality that have political effects', to cite Simon Dalby (1991: 274). In other words, naming

European 'power' is a political – and geopolitical – act. Perhaps one step towards reconceptualizing such categories could come, as Anderson (2006: 22) has argued, precisely by *properly recognizing today's European project as (also) 'imperial'*. The EU is a very different sort of 'empire' to the American one, to be sure, marked by a 'weak' territorial imagination and a particular universalist understanding of rights and values (Chopin's 'international constitutionalism'). But, as again Anderson (2006: 22) suggests, 'the empire metaphor points towards the possibility of *empowering* Europe to compete globally with other major powers' (my emphasis). It allows us to go beyond the categories of 'power' and 'weakness' that render Europe 'uncertain', 'indeterminate' and 'messy'; it allows us to begin to recognize new configurations of political, economic and cultural influence where Europe increasingly plays a perhaps 'quiet' but certainly leading role.

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Notes

¹ My title borrows from an itinerant, cross-national exhibition organized by a group of European architects, urbanists and photographers a few years back as an original attempt to capture Europe's new 'uncertain' and increasingly de-territorialized geographies in a series of 'eclectic atlases' (Multiplicity, 2002).

² In the article, I will sometimes use 'Europe' as a stand-in for the European Union – but also for the variety of 'Europe-making projects' which are not always fully captured by the current boundaries and institutions of the Union. With this use I do not mean to imply that the EU corresponds to 'Europe' tout court: it is, nonetheless, 'Europe's' recognized, institutionalized form today, and it is on critiques of the EU as a 'reluctant power' that my analysis will concentrate.

³ Tzvetan Todorov (2003) has characterized the new European subject as a 'puissance tranquille', a definition also evoked by Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa (2004): Europe as a 'forza gentile'; a similar argument is also made by Baumann (2004).

⁴ For a critical assessment of the debates surrounding the process of European integration see, among others: Christiansen et al. (2001); Chrysochoou (2001); Kelstrup and Williams (2000); Rosamond (2000); Rumford and Delanty (2005).

⁵ This argument is developed in more depth in Bialasiewicz et al. (2005a); on the question of values, see Bialasiewicz et al. (2005b).

⁶ Understandings that have provided an important source of inspiration for recent formulations of the Idea of Europe as a de-territorialized, post-national, 'space of rights' (see among others Balibar, 2006; Berezin and Schain, 2003; Soysal, 1997; Wiener, 1997).

⁷ See Siedentop's (2001) well-publicized arguments, or the somewhat more nuanced critique in Turner (2004).

⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of the trans-Atlantic divide, see Elden and Bialasiewicz (2006).

⁹ Although Leonard explicitly grounds his argument in the work of Nye (2003; 2004), a number of recent books have attempted to theorize the 'novel' nature of European ('super')power: among them, McCormack (2006) and Telo (2006).

¹⁰ The SAA is the first legal step to joining the EU. Brussels had suspended talks on the SAA with Serbia on 3 May.

¹¹ The image held by the EU foreign policy representative in many ways embodies the contradictions of 'European power': I cite just one recent event here. On 17 May 2007, Solana was awarded the International Charlemagne Prize of the City of Aachen, given to 'people and institutions who have worked especially hard to serve Europe and European Unity' (and previously granted to such illustrious Europeans as Konrad Adenauer and Jean Monnet). The award came largely in recognition of Solana's role as international mediator, in the Balkans and elsewhere, but it encountered virulent protest in the local papers, with 'anti-Solana' activists taking out an ad accusing the diplomat of 'simply leading to an increasing militarization of Europe's foreign policy' (see the report of 15.05.07 on: [cafebabel.com]).

¹² How true Leonard's claim may be is debatable, as the London and Madrid bombings all too poignantly attest. What is more, 'Europeans' – whether aid workers, engineers or journalists – are regularly captured in conflict zones just like their American counterparts, be it on the battlefields of Afghanistan or the oil wells of Nigeria.

¹³ For examples of Europe's role as global 'model-giver' see Giddens et al. (2006) and Rifkin (2004), but also Padoa-Schioppa (2004) and Prodi (1999). It is also interesting to note that in the past couple of years the EU has become much more open and explicit in articulating its

- 'transformative role' – the statement issued from the latest European Council (in June 2006) entitled 'Europe in the World: Some Practical Proposals for Greater Coherence, Effectiveness and Visibility' is one recent example (Commission of the European Communities, 2006).
- ¹⁴ A role further strengthened by the important role played by individual European countries as leading donor nations, in particular Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark (see the comment in Kubosova, 2007).
- ¹⁵ For a critical analysis of the geopolitics of EU aid, see Sebban (2007), as well as the reports of the Eurostep Network. For a more positive analysis of the EU's potential role see Moss and Rackowski (2007).
- ¹⁶ With a nod to Timothy Garton Ash's (1989) *The Uses of Adversity*, one of the more eloquent descriptions of the subversive power of 'weakness'.
- ¹⁷ Or 'military humanism', as Noam Chomsky (1999) has termed it.
- ¹⁸ There are also spaces 'free of law' within Europe, as the scandal over the CIA rendition flights and secret prisons recently revealed; the most complete discussion can be found in Grey (2006) and Paglen and Thompson (2006); for a broader discussion of the new 'geographies of exception', see Gregory (2004); Minca (2004; 2007a; 2007b). And 'Europe' itself is not without divisions over these questions, as the stance of some of the 'New Europeans' revealed – see the discussion in Feakins and Bialasiewicz (2006).
- ¹⁹ This understanding is enshrined in Article 1–2 of the European Constitution but is also an explicit part of the European Security Strategy approved in December 2003. For an overview of the debates on the diverging American and European worldviews, also vis a vis international law, see the edited collection by Levy et al. (2005).
- ²⁰ This is not to deny, of course, the vital role played by certain national initiatives – in particular, the key role of Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema.
- ²¹ It should be noted that this is not the first time the EU has conducted a peace-keeping operation. Over the past three years, Europe has put 14 peace-keeping operations into the field, making it, as *The Economist* notes, 'one of the world's main purveyors of peacekeeping' (2006: 22). The border between Ukraine and the breakaway Transnistrian Republic is currently patrolled by EU forces; there are also EU troops in the Congo and in Indonesia, monitoring the peace in Aceh. On current EU military and peace-keeping operations, see Mahony (2006) and Rettman (2007).
- ²² The impression was quite different in other national contexts. The Italian press was overwhelmingly positive, celebrating not just Europe's but also Italy's new-found role as Mediterranean mediator. In France, opinion was also generally positive: even Left-leaning *Le Monde Diplomatique*, amid huffing about Europe's 'imperial ambitions in the Middle East', was largely supportive of

European intervention (see Gresh, 2006; also Corm, 2006).

- ²³ The EU has, indeed, come under a lot of criticism for its insistence on dialogue with all political forces involved in the hostilities – pictures of Massimo D'Alema walking arm in arm with Hezbollah politicians through the streets of Beirut attracted the ire of not a few US (but also European) commentators (*La Repubblica*, 2006).
- ²⁴ A full history of the Alliance as well as an overview of its most recent activities can be found at: [http://www.unaoc.org/].

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