EPILOGUE

AN AGORA FOR EUROPE?

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BUILDING ON EXISTING FOUNDATIONS

The purpose of this Epilogue is to illustrate our recommendations in a practical way – in particular, our recommendation that international organisations should use their convening power to bring about new, multilayered, consultative processes, inclusive of the representatives of religion, as an extra dimension within the wider project of making multilateral diplomacy fit for purpose. We offer a brief outline of what an all-European initiative might look like if, in the early 2020s, there were the political will to inaugurate a regional process of the kind we have in mind.

Our argument does not stand or fall by this one example – other formats, other pathways, other geographical regions may prove more relevant in the long run to the implementation of our ideas. In 2020, however, no region is better placed than Europe to promote the simultaneous objectives of (i) new forms of diplomatic engagement inspired by religion and human values; (ii) forms of outreach whereby a deliberative assembly meets a high standard of ‘accessibility’; and (iii) a step change in region-to-region dialogue.

Post-World War II, Europe was at the heart of efforts to build global peace through solidarity. The EU, with its innovative economic foundations, remains the world’s most important example

of regional integration. The Council of Europe, which began its work in 1949, promotes a common culture in the sphere of human rights and the rule of law; this is understood as a continuing mission, underpinned by international agreements. The CSCE offered, in its day, yet another model of solidarity. States with different 'systems' acknowledged a responsibility, 'in the interest of mankind' (Helsinki Final Act, 1975¹), to define common values and make shared commitments across a comprehensive agenda. One of the challenges facing Europe today is to continue to develop the EU without dividing the European continent between 'neighbours', potential 'neighbours', and 'non-neighbours' (cf. Francis, 2020), and without forgetting the UN and the wider interests of humanity.

We refer to the proposed Europe-wide conference or consultation as an 'agora'. In ancient Athens, the agora was the large public square and market at the heart of ordinary life in community. Though public buildings were found nearby, the agora was distinct from the assembly, the council, the law courts, the temples, and the theatre. The agora is where you would go to take the pulse of the people. Socrates spent his days there, in dialogue with all comers.

In 2012, Ireland, as Chair-in-Office of the OSCE, invested diplomatic capital in the initiative 'Helsinki plus 40'. The OSCE has a particular geographical scope; it includes the US, Canada, and the states of the former Soviet Union – the zone 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok' (as the phrase goes). The goal of Helsinki plus 40 was to revive the potential of the OSCE in time for the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. This objective had the support of the EU. We looked forward at the time to building a 'security community' across the whole region – a zone of peace and active cooperation within which individual conflicts could be more easily resolved.

There is no space here to analyse the several factors that frustrated Helsinki plus 40 between its initiation in 2013 and its quiet demise in November 2015. However, it should be recorded, for present purposes, that during Helsinki plus 40 many governments were open to the idea of a summit, an all-European conference at the level of heads of state and government, provided it was well prepared.

In July 2017, UN Secretary General Guterres launched a Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors, which includes the following proposal (p. 17):

[The UN should] establish a world forum of religions and beliefs that would bring together an equal representation of religious leaders and actors, policy makers, educators, and media personnel from all world regions. The forum would deliberate on the role of religions in enhancing peaceful, inclusive, and just societies. The forum would have regional hubs.²

The ‘Plan of Action’, though not a document negotiated and agreed by governments, is an indication of the growing body of opinion supportive of international consultations in the sphere of values. We note that the Plan of Action envisages an initiative based on regional hubs.

THE EU CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

As we write, in spring 2020, the member states of the EU, the European Commission, and the European Parliament are considering (under difficult circumstances) the convening of a ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’, to run to summer 2022. Much will depend on decisions taken under the German Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2020.

In its position papers and speeches, the Commission strongly emphasises the importance of giving citizens a stronger say in shaping policies. To this end, the Commission is open to new formats for consultation. It sees an opportunity to engage the support of the approximately one million persons who serve as elected representatives at different levels throughout the EU. The European Parliament has passed a resolution on the character and scope of the proposed conference. Organisationally, the Parliament’s core objective is to involve citizens, youth, organised civil society, and a wide range of stakeholders in deliberations about the future.

All going well, the conference will build public understanding of the EU and its role in delivering objectives that the member states cannot deliver separately. To this end, the conference will consider both institutional questions and broader policy issues. The six ‘political guidelines’ or ‘headline ambitions’ for the EU proposed in 2019 by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen include ‘a European Green Deal, an economy that works for people, and a Europe fit for the digital age’ (von der Leyen, 2019). During the

COVID-19 crisis, public health policies and the associated budgetary and financial issues have played a central part in the EU's deliberations about the future.

GOING BEYOND THE EU CONFERENCE

It remains to be seen whether a process designed to consolidate the EU will have the time or the flexibility to look at global issues in the round. It seems to us that the construction of a common European home is more likely to flourish in the long run as part of a diplomatic step change at the global level. We have argued in this book that there is scope for a new 'Axial Age', in which the rules of society – at home and abroad – become more responsive to considerations of justice and are therefore more readily 'internalised'. There is an opportunity for the EU's Conference to do more than was originally intended; it can take an initial step towards a wider, longer-term, and potentially more innovative European consultation with global resonance.

According to the Book of Genesis, God said to Abraham, 'Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed' (Genesis, 12:3). There is every reason to expect religious actors to support a new initiative oriented towards a deepening of shared values in an uncertain world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wants the Jewish people, with other believers, to be 'the voice of hope in the conversation of humanity' (Sacks, 2009, p. 231). According to former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the overarching issue of our era is 'how we keep alive a narrative about the interwoven character of human well-being' (Williams, 2019, p. 42). In his address to the Council of Europe in 2014, Pope Francis argues that tensions in Europe are 'situated between multiple cultural, religious and political poles', and that we need a multilayered dialogue, or new 'agora', through which to build unity. In his speech on receiving the Charlemagne Prize in 2016, Pope Francis states that 'the soul of Europe is greater than the present borders of the union'. The Pope calls for 'the initiation of new social processes capable of engaging all individuals and groups' in the search for new approaches.

There is a potential convergence between, respectively, the unfilled potential of the Atlantic, European, and Eurasian space, as represented by OSCE; the UN Secretary General's interest in a values-led

process to underpin and take further the SDGs; the EU's preparations for a conference on Europe; and the priorities of religious leaders.

DESIGNING AN AGORA FOR EUROPE

If our proposal for a Europe-wide initiative is to become a workable proposition, three principles need to be accepted:

1. regional and interregional cooperation is one of the new frontiers of diplomacy worldwide
2. in the global context, the post-war vision of a Europe at peace from the Urals to the Atlantic remains relevant; a 'European security community' offers a more meaningful point of comparison for Africa, the Middle East, or East Asia than the EU on its own, at least at this historical juncture
3. the rhetoric that equates 'Europe' and 'European Union' should give way to a practical proposition: *the continuing success of the European Union is an essential condition for a Europe at peace and for the progress of global diplomacy*

Russia, Turkey, and their European and Eurasian neighbours are likely to participate in a European regional initiative, for geographical, historical, economic, and cultural reasons. The presence of the US and Canada in any wider European process is desirable for historical reasons and because these countries are part of European culture in the broad sense. The UK would participate, as would Norway and Switzerland. The design of any multilateral process implies mutual recognition by the participants. Assuming that the three principles listed above are accepted on all sides, the EU will be well placed to play a leading role in shaping the new forum or 'agora'. The conference already planned for 2020–2022 could assume the valuable task of beginning policy preparations within the EU for the broader European process – which (for the sake of argument) could be endorsed at a Europe-wide summit in 2025, on the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act.

That we should use our resources and capacities to strengthen social cohesion is already one of the ideas underlying the EU's internal conference. Promoting, as well, a wider European conference, as a response to regional and global responsibilities, would be a valuable demonstration of the Union's capacity to act.

Our proposal is consonant with the vision of Robert Schuman:

Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements that first create a *de facto* solidarity.
(Schuman Declaration of May 1950)³

A wider European conference, spanning cultural, religious, and political differences, can help inspire parallel initiatives in neighbouring regions: the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East, the Silk Road, and East Asia.

Broadly speaking, it would not be difficult to adapt the methodology of the former CSCE in order to ‘image’ a new, multilayered, all-European process. We think of such parameters as:

- serious political ‘investment’ in a new process, symbolised by a well-prepared all-European Summit, the first since 2010
- the primacy in any new process of government representatives, with decision making by intergovernmental consensus
- the choice of Europe as a regional hub within a potentially global project
- the concept of a wide agenda broken down into ‘baskets’
- the rejection by participants of any threat of force with its corollary that the dialogue partners are equal
- the commitment to CBMs
- a sufficiently long time scale

In our vision, the process would involve the religious confessions, engage parliaments and civil society, and – taking societal differences into account – promote ‘accessibility’ along the lines discussed in Chapter 6.

The premise of the new agora or forum is that good conceptual work can help create an enabling environment for long-term evolutionary change without calling into question our ability to defend our immediate interests in day-to-day negotiations elsewhere. At a global level, two distinct and complementary agendas need to be advanced simultaneously:

- a long-term dialogue, underpinned by confidence-building measures, to ensure that the values that underpin diplomacy remain ‘performative’
- day-to-day negotiations on the immediate issues

The all-European conference that we have in mind would address the first of these tasks. For member states of the EU, the second, more pressing agenda is suited to the conference that is currently being planned under the direct auspices of the EU. Our thesis is that a credible commitment to the first task gives us more ‘breathing space’ to address the second.

As well as the modalities for the all-European conference, the ‘baskets’ of issues to be examined within the new, long-term ‘framework of engagement’ should be defined, at least in broad terms, during preparatory talks. The structuring of future negotiations or consultations should carry in its DNA the probable results; so much so, that ‘talks about talks’ may turn out to be the most fruitful stage of the whole process.

SUBJECTS FOR DISCUSSION

Taking the CSCE process as a model, exploratory talks might work towards a future dialogue in five ‘strands’, covering, respectively, the principles of political legitimacy, three broad areas for enlarging cooperation (‘baskets’), and the development of interregional partnerships.

In the first strand, under the heading of ‘principles’, participating states would reaffirm existing *principles* (‘renew their marriage vows’), while addressing a number of issues on which there is as yet no clear, shared vision. How, for example, do we relate ‘sovereign equality’, as traditionally understood, to ‘pooling sovereignty’ within the EU, the ‘citizenship obligations’ of nation states, expressed, for example, in countless international treaties, and other institutional and regulatory realities?

In the *military/political basket*, participating states would need to revive an ambitious arms control agenda. Do we need, in addition, to set limits to espionage (a ‘code of conduct’), especially in the light of growing cyber capabilities? Can we establish a metric measuring the arms trade against other security related expenditures, such as the budgets for multilateral diplomacy?

In the *economic and environmental basket*, learning the lessons of the pandemic, and advancing the SDGs and the UN’s climate change agenda, would be central objectives. There would also be an opportunity to contribute to a global debate on the future of the economy and employment in the light of rising inequality, the impact

of technology, the growing role of capital and finance (as opposed to income earned through work), debates around the fundamental purpose of limited companies, and of course the additional, even more radical, questions that flow from state intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Do we accept that markets need a political and economic context, including social solidarity, respect for the environment, and a culture of trust, that markets themselves are incapable of producing?

In the *sphere of human rights and humanitarian cooperation*, there may be scope for a ‘whole-of-life’ approach to human rights, as the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency has begun to argue. The process we have in mind would address the question of migration, either in this basket or – if demography and migration were to be treated as aspects of a single subject – as a separate work stream. The cultural impact of social media, guidance for the development of AI, and the regulation of the Internet are other potential themes for the third basket.

The fifth strand of our multilayered process would address a range of questions in the general area of *geographical scope* and *interregional cooperation*. By ‘geographical scope’ we mean the area of application of measures agreed within the process. This topic would lead naturally to the question of relations with neighbouring areas or counterpart organisations and processes: the Mediterranean, the Middle East, China, East Asia, the African Union, and of course the UN.

We have argued that any vacuum of values at the ‘macro’ level impacts on the prospects for peace in each individual context. A long-term, value-led, all-European political process can become the counterpart at a ‘macro’ level of continuing efforts to resolve individual conflicts within the region. Therefore, though we do not suggest incorporating existing peace processes or bilateral disputes into the proposed agora for Europe, a new all-European multilateral initiative, if it happens, will change the political context, create perspective, and bring a renewed sense of purpose to peacemaking at the subregional level.

A PATHWAY TO A BETTER FUTURE

The mark of personal and political maturity is that our most consequential responsibilities are acknowledged and addressed, not hidden behind specious rationalisations. It cannot be said that maturity

has been the defining characteristic of multilateral diplomacy over recent decades. On the one hand, the SDGs represent, in embryo, a plan for humanity. On the other hand, the implementation of these goals is not proving to be a strategic issue for powerful governments. In channelling the work of international organisations into areas of specialisation and ‘comparative advantage’, governments have tended to shy away from the big picture.

That citizens have regard for one another, or nations trust one another, is not a ‘constitutive choice’ that we can make within the political process. However, actions of the right kind, even steps of a procedural character, can liberate a latent, evolutionary potential. By convening a new values-led process genuinely open to social transformation in the light of our deepest values, European governments can help us climb, as it were, to a higher pass in the mountains from which a better future as yet unseen can become visible for the first time. We must find the courage to believe, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed during the darkest days of the 20th century, that ‘something new can be born that is not discernible in the alternatives of the present’ (Bonhoeffer, 2017 [1942]).⁴

NOTES

- 1 The Helsinki Final Act can be found on the OSCE website at www.osce.org.
- 2 The Plan of Action can be consulted on the UN website at www.un.org. Its implementation falls under the remit of the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect.
- 3 The Schuman Declaration is available on the website of the Robert Schuman Foundation at www.robert-schuman.eu/en/declaration-of-9-may-1950.
- 4 See the early section of Bonhoeffer’s letter under the heading: ‘Without Ground under One’s Feet’.

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