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Europe's Crisis: Terror, Refugees and Impotence

By Michael Brenner
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The coincidental and overlapping refugee and terrorism crises besetting Europe pose a unique challenge to the European Union. For it places exceptional stresses on two weak points in the still incomplete community. The first is the absence of legitimate and effective mechanisms for reconciling divergent national interests, and composing them in coherent policies, when salient matters of a non-economic nature rise to the top of the agenda. The other is the weakness of a

common identity crucial to addressing problems that involve the EU's engagement with the rest of the world.

We see the consequence of those shortcomings in the disjointed response to the refugee wave that crested over the past few months. Generosity (on the part of Angela Merkel's German) and a fair measure of cooperation in arranging the transit of migrants from country to country have given way to the triumph of parochial interests as greatly accentuated by fears of terrorism. Those fears are producing restrictive policies as national governments resort to insular solutions for both self-protection and to counter the mounting domestic pressures from agitated publics.

A joint EU strategy for dealing with the refugee crisis is now in limbo with no early prospect of its regaining a firm footing. There were rudiments of a more or less comprehensive plan on the table early in November. They included: a formula for distributing 160,000 asylum seekers among member states; the need to establish processing centers at points of entry for most of the migrants – Greece and Italy above all; a sifting process for differentiating between those who had a valid basis for claiming political asylum as opposed to the seeking of a better life; an improved system for the repatriation of those who failed to qualify asylum status; a strategic partnership with the principal transit countries (above all Turkey) along with countries of origin to facilitate a monitoring of refugee flows and methods of repatriation; and payments to states burdened with large concentrations of displaced persons. Each piece of the package required further discussion and negotiation before it could be implemented. Moreover, there was no guarantee of an accord or that the overall strategy would work. A direction had been set, though.

Whatever rays of light were sparked by these initiatives, they soon dimmed when eclipsed by the terrorist acts in Paris and the excited response they engendered. Here, in summary, is their current status. Talks with Turkey begun by Angela Merkel in Ankara on October 31 have slowed to a crawl. The EU offer of financial aid to the Erdogan government was welcomed but the particulars on other parts of a proposed cooperative agreement awaiting more extensive talks. The way to be cleared at a Summit between the EU 28 and President Erdogan in Brussels on November 29; however, the latter's announcement that he would not be attended postpones the parties' full engagement to an undetermined later date. Hence, the questions associated with a prospective restriction of outflows, and of repatriation, are up in the air.

As for processing centers, no concrete plans as yet have been laid as to their staffing, how to render the process efficient, uniform and fair. On the Greek island of Lesbos, the buildings themselves have yet to be constructed. It is agreed that the "Dublin system," whereby the governments of "recipient" countries were responsible for registering migrants arriving on their shores is dead. However, officials in Rome and Athens remain fearful that they will be left with the main responsibility and costs unless an entirely new system is put in place reasonably soon. In regard to the approximately one million refugees who have entered Europe during the past year, there has been back-sliding from the optimistic high point in late October. Germany, along with Sweden and Austria, have reinstituted border controls which they declare to be temporary measures that will be removed once monitoring procedures adequate to handle the large numbers of migrants are in place. Denmark has reneged on its pledge to accept 1,000 Syrians. French Premier Valls has added his voice in stating unequivocally that France has reached its limit in

agreeing to accept 30,000 Syrian refugees – adding that Europe as a whole is in a state of super-saturation.

Meanwhile, border fences are going up along the main refugee transit routes: in Austria, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Even more disturbing of a collective effort are the decisions in Budapest, Warsaw, Bratislava and Prague to reject their assigned quotas outright while challenging the plan in European Court of Justice. All of this is taking place in the tense, fearful atmosphere created by the terrorist attacks of November 13 which have all European governments “running scared.” The community may not be back to square one. Yet, there is no gainsaying that there is no consensus at this time on the design and architecture of a system to deal with the current and prospective future crises.

These developments are threatening the European Union’s landmark Schengen Agreement. EU Commission President Jean-Claude Junker warned last week that “Schengen is partly comatose.” He went on to say: “If the spirit leaves our hearts, we will lose more than Schengen. A single currency does not exist if Schengen fails. It is not a neutral concept. It is not banal. It is one of the pillars of the construction of Europe.”

Schengen created a single EU-wide legal space that allows for free movement across national borders. An ancillary provision permits unimpeded entry of citizens at external boundaries. The viability of those arrangements is now in jeopardy. Unrestricted movement within the community for whomever has managed to gain entry – visitor with visa, refugee, holder of fake passport – is increasingly seen by national authorities as too risky in the current threat environment. That concern is compounded by the incomplete cooperative mechanisms now in place among police and security agencies. While cooperation is at unprecedentedly high levels, there remain issue of timely communication, differing methods of collecting and evaluating data, and a certain reluctance to make very sensitive information available to counterparts whose data bases are not hermetically sealed.

The essential nature of the European Union, now nearly 60 years old, featured pragmatism, compromise and an ingrained sense that its members’ welfare was inseparable for the project’s success in weaving a coherent pattern from its various national threads. Its peculiar set of transnational national institutions, co-existing with enduring national structures, worked on the economic and social aspects of community affairs. The soft-war of low-key, unemotional politics matched the hardware of rules and institutions. Security was left to another organization, NATO, which institutionalized deference to American leadership. Efforts over the past twenty-five years to fashion a Common Foreign & Security Policy never have amounted to much. The EU punches well below its weight on the international stage – except for commercial matters.

A weak collective European identity is at once cause and effect of that phenomenon. The seeming surety of who and what Europe is now is dimmed – a victim of the distancing in time of negative reference points, of success and of failure.^[i] Success in fostering a pacific, self-absorbed citizenry devoted to enjoying the fruits of prosperity in a stable community. Failure in the elites’ inability either to reassure that the good times will continue in the face of exposed vulnerabilities – economic and political – or to muster the spirit to deal with the forces that are making the future look hazardous. Diversity (of immigrant religion and culture), disparities (of

wealth and economic security), demographics (of an inverted age pyramid), and dependency (of energy and security) on others are the sources of a free-floating neurosis.

Europe's external environment feeds those anxieties. From the world outside the community come the waves of globalization, in its several manifestations: the immigrants; the terrorist creeds and passions; the oil and gas; and – not least – the omnipresence of the United States. The compelling question is: what is the nature of the European collectivity and how do Europeans conceive of it? Is Europe simply a loose component of some more nebulous entity called the West or an autonomous entity, however Western, that has its own political persona, purposes and allegiances? Providing answers that are persuasive – to publics as well as political elites – is the *sine qua non* for meeting Europe's obligation to itself and to the rest of the world.

The twin issues of the European Union's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizenry and their sense of collective identity lie at the heart of the issue. They are intertwined. Political authority, as distinct from the exercise of power, does not exist without some common bond among those who are subject to its actions, and they with their rulers. That bond takes many, diverse forms; all have as their denominator at least a modicum of a consciously shared social existence. Collective self-conception can be as basic as obedience to the same authority and accepting its rules. Today, many of the public, and some government leaders, are instinctively disobedient to the Commission of Council majorities who insist on things like the acceptance of refugees from alien cultures that they strongly object to – in large part because it threatens their sense of both national and European identity.

The inclusion of large immigrant clusters countries dilutes the value of collective experience. It forces attention on what is novel and different. It exacerbates difficulties in making extant procedures work, and opens questions of ultimate purpose long elided or shrugged off as irrelevant. Moreover, the present way of doing things, a matter of custom as much as rules, may not conform to the traditions of newer members. That is the say, the commitment to conciliation and compromise that, in turn, enables a technocratic *modus operandi* is not necessarily natural for countries where the premises of collective action have recently undergone radical alteration and continue to undergo close scrutiny. These concerns are closely analogous to those raised by the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union.

The Europe of the EU has had a very distinctive sense of history. If America in the late eighteenth century was born against others' history, Western Europe in the mid-twentieth century succeeded in liberating itself from its own history. The shattering events of the first half of the century opened a way for the European peoples to change profoundly their ways of interacting. Liberation entailed an emotional, philosophical and intellectual distancing from ingredients of political life that had been the hallmarks of public affairs. Internationally, it was the lethal rivalries of power politics. Domestically, it was ideologically driven factional conflict. The 'civilian societies' of today's Europe (especially at its western end) have transmuted themselves. Their *polities* are suspended somewhere between a national past and a truly supranational future.

This new Europe was made possible more by a process of political subtraction than political addition. That is to say, the domination of public affairs by prosaic concerns and tame ambitions is effect and reinforced cause of the Europeans shedding those parts of their make-up that could impede the process of integration. Nationalist passion, ideological inspiration, the impulse to draw lines of all kinds between 'us' and 'them' – all have dried up. The societies that have evolved, due in good part to this phenomenon, are also noteworthy for a diminished sense of collective duty, an aversion to danger and sacrifice, and an introversion that borders on the self-centered. They have experienced the banality of success. Now they are chary about doing anything that could embroil them in the all too recognizable history occurring in other parts of the world – above all, the Middle East.

'Little Europe' cannot insulate itself from global forces. To fix on them, whether expressed tangibly by unassimilated immigrant communities or over the horizon, is to force attention on the identity issue. From one perspective, it is no different from the existential feelings of vulnerability experienced everywhere in the advanced liberal world. Reasons and roots, or lack of the latter, are similar whether in America or Japan. The important difference in Europe is the greater blurring of national identity and the formlessness of Europe's political identity. They combine to heighten the spreading sentiment that Europe as constituted is neither enough of a self-defining, collective reference point nor an entity that can secure individuals in a globalizing yet intimidating world. They clearly are related. As noted earlier, a weak sense of 'Europeanness' denies Union institutions the degree of legitimacy that would allow them to crystallize European interests and to affirm them externally.

For sixty years, Europe could afford to be strategically parochial, or so it has thought. So long as America tended to matters elsewhere around the globe, even if its manner of doing so did not always elicit praise. That dominant/subordinate relationship continues to inflect their interaction and impinges as well on the Europeans' sense of self along with their aptitude for autonomous behavior. Such a long hiatus in exercising normal powers of sovereignty, set in the broader context of overweening American cultural and intellectual influence, inescapably has created a culture of inequality.

Perhaps most debilitating is the sense that what Europe decides, what it does – or even whether it does nothing at all – cannot determine its future. That is because a willful America pronounces on the matters that count most, because Europe is unable to counteract or deflect it, and thus in some profound way Europe is irrelevant to the great issues of the day. There could be no better example of a self-fulfilling, if silent, prophecy.

The global loss of trust in the United States has exacerbated the Europeans' predicament. A less effective American foreign policy aggravates regional problems. A less credible United States whose ideals are eroded by egregious acts delegitimizes the West as a whole. Together, they raise the stakes on Europe filling the gap in both effectiveness and legitimacy. Yet, the former challenge is neither recognized nor engaged as Europeans suffer from the residual instincts of reliance on Washington and from their own self-doubts.

They are psychologically handicapped by that dependency relationship over the past 70 years. One need only contrast Russia's display of purposeful action with European leaders' maneuvers

and gestures to recognize how unprepared they are to take on the challenge of charting their own course.

It is against this background that we can better understand Europe's unnaturally strong impulse to follow in the wake of the United States – no matter what. Over the past fifteen years, it has suffered the side-effects of America's disastrous policies, in the greater Middle East. It remains the loyal lieutenant as even greater failures and attendant dangers impend due to Washington's arrogance, ignorance and poor judgment. At this moment, the unprecedented degree of simple incoherence of the fragmented bits of policy that it is executing so ineptly spawn the refugee crisis as they have spawned and aggravated the crisis associated with violent jihadism. To continue accepting the status of passive accomplice is to deny Europe's own responsibility for its fate and to make itself a willing victim of whatever befalls it.

The outcome is incongruous. Since Washington allows itself to be held in thrall by its sometimes allies in the Middle East – Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey, and given Europe's uncritical deference to the United States, its own high stakes in the region are hostage to those warped relationships. That was manifest this week in the automatic obedience of European governments in to the Obama administration's demand that NATO express "solidarity" with Turkey after its downing of a Russian plane. For its own unstated reasons, Washington overlooks abundant evidence that Erdogan is a de facto ally of al-Nusra/al-Qaeda and facilitator of ISIL.

In short: Europe's feeble leaders have placed the well-being of their peoples in the hands of the Salman/Salafist branch of the Saudi royal family led by the unstable Crown Prince Mohammed, the reckless Hebrew zealot Netanyahu, and the ruthless would-be Caliph Erdogan in Ankara.

Update

French President Hollande (indirectly) and Foreign Minister Fabius (directly) indicated today that France is prepared to work with the Syrian government's armed forces against ISIL. This is in direct opposition to the White House position while aligning with that of Russia. It is the first time since France and Germany criticized the Iraq invasion in 2002-2003 that a European ally has been ready to do other than nod in agreement at any American initiative in the Middle East. This despite the unbroken string of disastrous American policies. In Washington earlier this week, Hollande was given the standard Obama line: Russia is a strategic enemy of the West to be isolated, Turkey is to be kept immune from criticism, al-Nusra/al-Qaeda are part of the "moderate" opposition to Assad, the Assad government is responsible for the rise of ISIL, cooperation with Iraq's Shi'ite militias is to be avoided because Iran remains a hostile power and we have to placate the Saudis and Israelis. The implications for France's priority commitment to fight ISIL were clear – and unpalatable.