

# Europe's goal should not be a United States of Europe, but a better united Europe of states

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/11/20/europes-goal-should-not-be-a-united-states-of-europe-but-a-better-united-europe-of-states/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/11/20/europes-goal-should-not-be-a-united-states-of-europe-but-a-better-united-europe-of-states/)

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*Is a European 'superstate' desirable and, if so, could it ever be created? [Simon Glendinning](#) writes on philosophical approaches to this question, drawing on the work of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx and Derrida. Taking inspiration from Kant, he argues that rather than aiming for the ideal of a European state, we should instead direct our efforts toward a 'negative substitute': the formation in Europe of a relatively stable federation of states each retaining 'limited sovereignty'.*



In a [recent article](#), Darian Meacham and Francesco Tava write on what they term the “post-Europe project”. In making a short and somewhat critical reply, I do not want to give the impression that I find the aims of their discussion unwelcome. The effort to explore ways of thinking beyond Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism is something I wholeheartedly applaud, and the attempt to do so in their article with reference to the thought of the Czech phenomenologist [Jan Patočka](#) is extremely interesting. It is far from a straightforward ambition, but I too think that “hope for a European project” is inseparable from the development of “a philosophical and historical engagement with the concrete structures and institutions of European life.”

Integrating these two elements – finding a way to move from and between philosophy and concrete life – is of course something of a holy grail for all philosophical reflection. Karl Marx perhaps thought it was beyond philosophy's reach to do so, but we do not have to follow him on that in following his desire to contribute in some way (putting it in his grandiose terms) to changing the world.

The opportunity provided by a philosophically informed approach to the future of European union is, as the authors suggest, to help liberate discussion from domination by narrowly “economic thinking which sees growth, expansion and accumulation” as the be all and end all of Europe's ambitions. However, I found the authors' assessment of “what is needed” or “required” in its place to remain too stubbornly close to a classical form of rational cosmopolitical thinking that is no less all or nothing – and which, I will argue here, in wanting everything can get nothing.

## Apocalypse now

I can begin to explain this with reference to what is, in my view, the heart of their thought-provoking article: a wonderful remark from Jean-Paul Sartre on a French apocalyptic anxiety, and its attendant salvationist coda:

*When a Frenchman, for example, says to other Frenchmen “The country is done for” — which has happened, I should think, almost every day since 1930 — it is emotional talk; burning with love and fury, the speaker includes himself with his fellow-countrymen. And then, usually, he adds “Unless ...”*

The authors give a more recent example of this trope with Jeremy Rifkin's suggestion that “Europe can prosper and save not only capitalism but also its way of life if it carefully follows these steps...” But the salvationist structure of this crisis narrative applies with equal if not more force to their own contribution. Europe, which “once ruled nearly all the world” is now, we are told, “at the mercy of global forces and dynamics”. Once great and central to world history, Europe is now thoroughly decentered and marginalised. Indeed, in a certain way it is already over for Europe, it is done for, and we must now think beyond it to save it, in the form of a “post-Europe” of the future.

The authors summarise the contemporary scene as one of genuine crisis: “Individual nation states are no longer capable of protecting their citizens' interests against global market forces; transnational, European governance,

regulatory and civic structures are necessary. The current ones are not performing their function.” Today, as in the 1930s when Edmund Husserl [reflected](#) on the situation in Europe, we might say: “Europe’s nations are sick, Europe itself is sick”. So we are done for. Unless...

Unless what? The authors suggest that what we urgently need now are renewed “discussions of post and transnational democratic institutions...far beyond what is currently readily available.” The idea seems really to be that the only truly adequate response to Europe’s current malaise will be through the development of a properly transnational democracy in Europe: the formation of a European government.

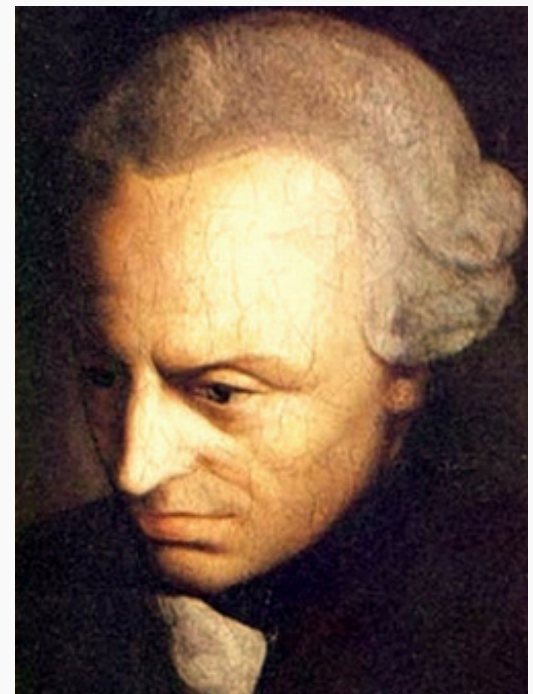
The call for transnational democratic governance in Europe is just one side of the story. At the same time, there is also a call for a revived role for Europe in the world at large. Not a call for a revival of the old Eurocentric world order that is and should be totally over, but for European political institutions to sustain an outlook with a genuinely cosmopolitical horizon: the new “post-Europe” is to become “a useful (not unique) tool to tackle global issues”, it “must have a global justice dimension” and promote “global economic and social solidarity”. That package – a renewed European political body with a cosmopolitical horizon – is quite an “Unless”.

### The Kantian idea of Europe

But it is not really new either. The idea of European nations “becoming one” in the context of a developing world-wide movement towards a globally just condition is perhaps *the* classic “idea of Europe”. In the 1780s and 90s, when old Europe was still young, Immanuel Kant [sketched](#) what has often been thought of as the basic form of this idea: the formation of “a great political body without precedent in the past” on our continent, a political body that would be central to the world-historical movement towards a fully “cosmopolitan existence” for all humanity.

Kant’s ideas were not particularly well received. Thinking that Kant was proposing the positive idea of a supranational “superior power” that would “secure eternal peace”, G.W.F. Hegel [rejected](#) Kant’s ideas as completely unworkable: “the relation of states to one another has sovereignty as its principle,” insisted Hegel. According to Hegel, while there may be all sorts of noble motivations for them and moral and religious considerations that might strengthen them, international relations between sovereign states cannot be pacified by treaties: any agreements reached are always “liable to be disturbed by the element of contingency” – the agreements may suit all parties at the time, but what if there is a turn of events that means it works out really badly for one of the signatories? What then?

Well, says Hegel, “when the particular wills of states can come to no agreement, the controversy can be settled only by war.” International institutions fare no better on this view. The rights of nations “have reality not in a general will, which is constituted as a superior power, but in their particular wills.” Once again, international pacific institutions are fine as long as things go well for all concerned. But the idea of eternal peace is simply not realistic: “in the *actual* situation” relations established by the treaties that found such institutions are “continually shifted or abrogated” according to the particular wills of nations and their perception of their national interests. One cannot but think that Hegel has Kant in view when he [criticises](#) thinking “when it plumes itself upon being cosmopolitan, in opposition to the concrete life of the citizen”.



Immanuel Kant (Public Domain)

Must we follow Hegel then, and conclude that the classic European project (or “post-Europe project” with its more modest global-leadership ambitions) is delusionary and beyond reform? I don’t think so. Not at all. However, nor do I think that leaves the kind of international government in Europe prescribed in this article as the only card left on the

table. Hegel may have thought he had Kant's ideas in view, but in fact not only did Kant *just like Hegel* regard the positive idea of an international state as completely untenable and hopeless, his whole approach is also, and again *just like Hegel*, profoundly sceptical of the lofty ideas of what he calls "rational cosmopolitans".

Human beings, [according to Kant](#), do not "pursue their aims...in accordance with any integral, prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans". Indeed, according to Kant, the grand projects of the salvationist "Unless" which would replace national institutions with "post and trans-national democratic institutions" are always roads to nowhere but "universal despotism" and "the graveyard of freedom". The democratic claim of every rational cosmopolitan may be that "each has power", but the reality is that (unhappy with the way things are going) they each want power. And in the setting of an international government they do so without recourse to the "concrete life of the citizen".

It is beyond debate that the concrete lives of the citizens of Europe are much more closely attached to their nation states than to Europe. Rational academics may wish it was otherwise but they are deceiving themselves if they think that it is. They may feel that they are themselves perfectly happily detached from any such atavistic anachronism. But if they think that is a widely shared view they are in fantasy land. Of course, history does not stand still, and maybe one day, as Marx had [supposed](#), globalisation will make what he regarded as "national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness" "more and more impossible".

Writing in the 1930s, Paul Valéry could [already see](#) that the time was over in which "history was made up of events that could be localized", and in which politics could be pursued within an assumption or wager "on the isolation of events" rather than an "immediate interdependence". But that [does not mean](#) that cosmopolitan efforts to realise conditions which cultivate "mutual understanding and peace" would be accelerated by effecting "an amalgamation of the separate nations under a single power". *That* eventuality — wanting everything — gets nothing: it crushes the "germs of goodness" in the cosmopolitan idea and, wishing to establish what Valéry [called](#) "the harmony of uniformity", the result would not only be "monotonous" but destroy the very variety that is the "condition of vitality". In the end, with no one happy, it would, as Kant [says](#), "lapse into anarchy".

National competences are not something one can waive away with a magic wand and reassign to international institutions. Again, Kant was right: to the rational cosmopolitan's proposal for an international state that would allow nations to "emerge from the lawless condition of pure warfare", one can only say: "But this is not the will of the nations"; it is not the sort of thing that nations (as such) can, intelligibly, will.

But Kant does not leave it there, as Hegel does. Instead, Kant argues for the "negative substitute" of the positive idea: the formation in our continent of a relatively stable "federation of free states". This set-up cannot secure eternal peace: "there will always be", Kant acknowledges, "a risk of [war] bursting forth anew". However, it can still make war *less likely*, and can still serve as a model of international right. As Jacques Derrida has [argued](#), international institutions like the UN or the EU do not signify that a total loss of sovereignty for nations is the condition of peace. No they "have signified that *limited* sovereignty is a condition of peace." *Limited sovereignty all round*, not a new sovereign power constituted as a superior power over the old nations. This is the road we must travel if, today, we want to maintain any of the vitality and international relevance of old Europe in a new Europe to come.

## Pressing ahead

It would be beyond complacent not to be [alive to](#) "all that is *not going well* in the capitalist states and in liberalism" in our time. Moreover, in an age of daily news media "we are", as Valéry [already felt](#) in 1939, "harassed with reading about things of immediate and violent interest. In the public press the news is of such diversity, incoherence, and intensity that the little time we [have], out of twenty-four hours, is entirely taken up with that". In this situation, massively amplified and qualitatively transformed today, politicians of all colours and at all levels, but perhaps especially at a national level, are [increasingly rendered](#) "structurally incompetent" to do anything to address our problems, and the "field of discussions, deliberations and decisions" in elected parliaments is massively reduced too.

As the British Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) admitted in a recent interview "every day, in modern politics, you are

fighting a battle of handling the media... I want to run a country not a 24-hour media channel. What you have to do is handle that stuff but at the same time keep your eye on the long term horizon." Perhaps today, more than ever, it can hardly be done, especially not in the national arena: the eye no sooner looks ahead than it is dragged back into what is immediately and interdependently in front of us. In this situation strong international institutions which bend the arc of history towards the horizon of what is rationally ideal are, indeed, our best hope.

Kant rightly speaks about the infinite improvability of international institutions, and describes this as a movement of "continual approximation" to the ideal. But, again, the ideal itself is [regarded](#) as a totally "impossible" and "impracticable" one: what is in question then, *concretely*, are not efforts to realise the rational ideal of an international state but *endless efforts at the improvement of the negative substitute*. We should heed Hannah Arendt's [warning](#) to the best-intentioned humanitarians:

*Contrary to the best-intentioned humanitarian attempts to obtain new declarations of human rights from international organisations, it should be understood that this idea transcends the present sphere of international law which still operates in terms of reciprocal agreements and treaties between sovereign states; and, for the time being, a sphere that is above the nations does not exist. Furthermore this dilemma would by no means be eliminated by the establishment of a "world government".*

To paraphrase [Henry David Thoreau](#) – to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves EU-government men and women, I ask for, not at once or soon a United States of Europe, but at once and for the foreseeable future, a better United Europe of States.

Oh how dull that must sound. But it is *so much better than nothing, and so much better than the ideal*. In his "Message to the 21st Century" [Isaiah Berlin](#) made the point with typical elegance:

*I know only too well that this is not a flag under which idealistic and enthusiastic young men and women may wish to march—it seems too tame, too reasonable, too bourgeois, it does not engage the generous emotions. But you must believe me, one cannot have everything one wants—not only in practice, but even in theory.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Martin Grüner Larsen (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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