

# The new millennium in Europe: future prospects and problems. An interview to Göran Therborn

*Edited by Gianfranco Bettin Lattes*

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*Professor Therborn: Modernity has been one of the dominant leitmotifs in European social theory. In fact, the end of Cold War and advanced industrialisation have represented the apex of modernity in Europe. Now according to your analysis, as well as that of contemporary scholars, Europe is going downhill; our continent is slowly moving away from the*

*(ambivalent) dimension of modernity. To quote only two aspects: unemployment has grown steadily over the last few decades and Europe's economic competitiveness at an international level has gradually diminished whereas Asiatic capitalism seems to be on a steady upswing. Furthermore, there is a decline in Europe's ability to represent a source of cultural and political influence in the world. The exhausted European models of socialism and neo-liberalism seem, in terms of cultural policy, to have weakened the project for an integrated Europe and the European image abroad. However, you have written that one European ideological tradition is still effective on our contemporary scene: human rights as the inheritance of 1789. Considering that Europe is still an important synonym for a supranational union of states - representing as it does an exemplary model for the world in its ideas of pluralism, tolerance and solidarity - do you not agree that there is a renewed and significant role for Europe in the modern world that goes beyond an exclusively economic idea of modernity?*

Modernity had better not be seen as exclusively economic, but rather as a time of culture, of an epoch, a region, an ideology, an art, or a set of people, oriented towards the future, to creating something new, rejecting or at least questioning and criticizing authorities, wisdom, and achievements of the past.

Europe is a declining power and influence in the world, a decline accelerated by European mismanagement of the financial crisis. The labour movement and socialism were European inventions, but they are now in decline, without getting universalized, unlike capitalism, also of European origin. The transnational project of Europe, on the other hand, is still inspiring institutions and strivings in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. However, in Europe itself, the dynamic of "an ever closer union" among peoples has stopped recently, and the British Right (and other forces) are trying hard to reverse it. It is true that our human rights legacy still can provide visions of a better future, but unfortunately it is also true that the concept has been very contaminated by geopolitical hypocrisy and instrumentalization. According to the full Western media choir, there are serious human rights issues in Cuba but not in USA, although it is in the latter country that unarmed Black men are regularly (and usually without punishment) killed by White policemen or private guards. The choir is decrying human rights problems in Russia, without noticing that it is in today's Ukraine, not Russia, where a roster of opinions have recently been declared criminal. Singing a song, like the Soviet anthem, can now give you up to five years in jail in Kyiv. – Nevertheless, in spite of all this, human rights do provide a compass for social change. Inequality, for instance, is a violation of human rights – of free personal development.

*The process of European integration is challenged more and more by various realities in Europe that do not co-exist easily. Various parts of Europe: North, South and East seem to pursue divergent interests rather than similar ones. For example, the contrasts between Germany and Greece seem to reflect a North/South conflict in Europe. In such a*

*complex scenario, do you think there is a role for a Mediterranean Europe resting on an axis formed by Italy and Spain along with the main and more established axis formed by France and Germany?*

Not in itself, it will all depend on the political situation. The Greek Syriza government has not got any help from the PP government of Spain.

*Europe is a multinational conglomeration of states, but it is still ‘in the making’: it is still searching for a unitary political identity. So far the institutions of the European Union do not seem to have promoted the development of a culture of political democracy even though many European societies/states are based on political systems that are strongly democratic. In particular, in Southern Europe, where democratic government is a fairly recent development, unemployment, corruption among the governing class, a rapid increase in inequality and poverty have encouraged what Weber used to call “street democracy”. Do you think that the mix of economic, social and political crises could be undermining democracy in Europe? In Spain the Indignados and in Italy the Movimento 5 Stelle on one hand and the Lega Nord on the other seem to offer a new political role to ‘the man in the street’ with populist forms of leadership. Or vice versa could one consider the consensus for these new radical political movements an attempt to react to the representative crisis of political parties and therefore a way to endow democracy with new energy? What is your view of these political dynamics? Do you think they are compatible with the future of democracy in Europe?*

The thinning out of political parties and of civic organizations of solidarity, like trade unions and cooperatives, have made the political elites increasingly insulated from ordinary people, a phenomenon most dramatic in labour parties and in Christian Democracies. An intermingling urban upper-middle-class stratum, more at home in TV studios than among ordinary people, are now running most current democracies. That is as serious for democracy, in the classical sense, as rule by the people. The emergence of massive, inter-generational protest demonstrations in the streets has the potential of revitalizing democracy. But there are at least two caveats. The social implications of such movements are ambiguous. The Movimento 5 Stelle is rallying people from the far right as well as from the far left – and a good many in between – under a *de facto* authoritarian personalistic leadership. Secondly, social protests need to find some adequate political form to vitalize democracy. Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain have managed to do that – the latter even inspiring similar new initiatives among the political centre.

*In your essay “The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy” (1977) you pointed out that the various analyses of the process of democratisation had ignored an important variable: that of taking part in a war beyond national frontiers, or the threat of such a war. You highlighted that such a war (or its threat) has been a crucial factor in forcing bourgeois states to grant power and authority to the population. Nowadays, if we replace the “war*

variable” with a “socio-economic crisis variable” what, in your opinion, could be the effects on the stabilisation of democracy in European countries? In the Mediterranean area, and in particular in the case of Spain and Italy, where the weakness of political parties is so evident, what do you think is the future of democracy?

For the moment, democratic prospects look better in Spain than in Italy, provided that the Catalan issue is handled in a democratic way. Italian politics of the Second Republic still does not seem to have been able to develop a well-functioning democracy. While the corrupt theatrics of “Berlusconismo” seems to be waning, the rise of “Grillismo” and the manipulative intrigues and electoral fixing of Renzi hardly, mean a clean-up of the agora.

*In your book “ The Killing Fields of Inequality ” (2013) you show how devastating everywhere are three types of inequality (vital, existential, material or resource) and their mechanisms of reproduction (distanciation, extension and exploitation). Inequality is the most pressing contemporary topic in Europe too. In Mediterranean Europe, in particular in Spain and Italy, do you think that some traditional institutions such as the family, the Catholic values of solidarity and a widespread participation in no-profit voluntary work could be capable, as in the past, of attenuating the perverse effects of social inequality and could perhaps prepare the basis for a more egalitarian future? Or do you feel that changes in the social and economic system require new forms of solidarity and, if so, which?*

Charity is better than no charity, but it is a sobering thought to realize that you find most charity in the most inegalitarian of the rich countries, i.e. in the US. The family is cushioning inequality and poverty in the Mediterranean countries, where, as in Italy, it is common for people to live with their parents well into their thirties, whereas in Scandinavia almost all young people leave their parental home soon after 20. So, family and charity may alleviate the pain, but constitute no solution. The Italian family has also the effect of making Italy the OECD country with the least inter-generational economic mobility. Institutional changes are necessary to reduce inequality, social investment in daycare and the development of all children, school systems preventing anybody from falling behind, opening access to the labour and housing markets for young people, an economy geared to egalitarian full employment, reining in the autonomy of finance capitalism, norms of decent scales of remuneration for work, regular health check-ups for everybody, investment in public health, progressive and adequate taxation.

*In your analysis on “indignation against inequality” you argued that “indignation has not been profound enough”, because it addressed the negative effects of inequality rather than inequality per se. On these premises, do you think this kind of mobilisation can succeed in challenging the current economic and political model and help to project an alternative model of society?*

All egalitarians have to contribute to promote a broader and deeper understanding of inequality, in particular of vital inequality, of health and of life expectancy. In some places, vital equality has been included into programs of sustainability: economic, social, and ecological sustainability. The progressively-governed second and third cities of Sweden, Gothenburg and Malmö, are currently embarking on such programs, on the basis of careful research, carried out jointly by academic scholars and municipal investigators.

*The strong links between national context and the science of sociology is a fundamental key to understanding the history of European (and not only European) sociology: in your opinion is there any sense in working as a sociologist within a national context? The national context probably remains a meaningful entity only to seeing to what extent smaller, cross-cutting instances are emerging through it. Some processes, as for example the transnational nature of capitalism, the long duration of the socio-economic crisis, the pervasive nature of inequalities and of environmental risk, or to put it in more general terms, the persistence of what is called globalisation, should stimulate a kind of sociology endowed with new analytical tools, capable of understanding the world as a whole and embracing the past and the contemporary at one glance. Yet this new orientation and development of sociology seems somewhat problematic, both in theory and on a factual empirical level. Do you think this is so? And if you do why is sociology so resistant to a change of paradigm?*

Not everybody needs to do the same thing. A sociology which answers the question, “Where is society?” by “in the world”, is certainly the one most needed today. And it is gradually emerging, though I, like you, would be happier with a more rapid change. However, there are also both the rationale and the demand for local and national studies of social processes, as they are the ones usually affecting us most directly.

*On reading your researchs it seems clear, and it is a theme to which you return repeatedly, that you have a great liking for history and an appreciation of its methodological thoroughness. What do you think of relations between history and sociology and finally what suggestions would you make to sociologists of the new generation on how to use history in their research?*

Yes, I am convinced that in order to grasp and to explain the present, and to assess its possible changes and future you are much helped by knowing its history. Social scientists have also another reason to read historiography, historians are much better writers. In contemporary sociology there seems to be a negative correlation between good scholarship and good writing, the latter expressed in freewheeling speculative pop sociology, whereas in historiography it is rather a rule that a great historian is also a great writer. I have recommended my students at Cambridge to read great historians in order to learn scholarly writing.

*In your book “Les sociétés d’Europe du XXe au XXIe” siècle - translated in Italy by il Mulino in 2011 - you wrote that comparative research should not limit its work to a comparison of states because the context should be taken into consideration and, in particular, those interesting variables for the comparison of continents or at least of other blocs of inter-continental and inter-regional states. At the same time you have expressed serious criticism of the “theory of the world system” because you feel it is not useful in explaining the history of European sociology. Could you say more on the limits and positive prospects that are typical of the comparative method as applied to the contemporary study of Europe and/or of some of its significant areas, such as Southern Europe?*

Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system analysis was (in 1974) a breakthrough for global sociology, but in my view and research experience, the world is more a stage, with actors largely formed locally and nationally, than a system whose parts derive as elements from the system. Inter-national comparisons are easier to make than other cross-country studies because national data are more accessible than intra-nation regional, local, or sub-cultural ones. But I am sure that lots of studies comparing, say, intra-national cultural and linguistic variations or economically developed and underdeveloped regions, e.g., in Italy and Spain, are both feasible and fascinating. Surely, many exist already, although I have not (yet) dived into them.

*You have been a pioneer in the study of European sociology, writing on this subject both in theoretical terms and from an empirical point of view in books that are original and important. However, it would appear that to date this area of social science has been developed to a greater extent in the related discipline of political economy rather than sociology itself. Why do you think sociology has been so tardy in adopting Europe as the object of its study and what can be done about it?*

You are probably right, and I think it stems from the EU project being more one of political economy and legal administration than social integration. There are also well-established sub-disciplines in economics and political science near at hand for European studies, international trade and international (political) relations. International sociology was either global or development sociology. Currently, with great help from European funding, European sociology is picking up, but too many research projects are only juxtapositions of local studies by local teams from different countries – without much effort going into comparative analysis and understanding.

*A persistent cleavage that has always split the European context is the difference between Catholic and Protestant countries, to which we can now add Islam as another variant, as a result of huge and irreversible migrations. How do you think the process of secularisation, which has been a typical aspect of European “modernity”, is reacting to this and what effects will it have? From another point of view, what contribution can*

*religion, and Christianity in particular, offer to the development of a sense of belonging to the European community?*

Europe is the most secularized part of the world, you notice that most clearly, perhaps, comparing mother and seceded settler countries, Britain is much less religious than USA, post-Franco Spain than Hispanic America, Portugal much less than Brazil. The difference is rooted in the different parts played by the established churches in the struggles for modernity. In Europe they were invariably on the side of the Prince and the aristocracy; when the latter lost, the churches did too, with a time lag. American priests and clergymen were often in the forefront of the struggle for independence. The Protestant-Catholic division of Western Europe I don't think has any very significant contemporary relevance, and the capacity of the churches to keep Europe together is certainly very limited. However, in their chastened weakness nowadays, they do very often play a positive integrative role, in their oecumenical solidarity with Muslim immigrants. In many localities of today's Europe, almost the only help and protection harassed refugees or poor immigrants can get come from the local priest or clergyman.

*Could you say what you think about the relationship of politics/religion in the specific cases of Spain and Italy, that is in two societies that used to be profoundly Catholic? Spain has undergone a definite separation of Church and State leading to the full recognition of civil and human rights as well as that of equal opportunity. On the contrary, in Italy the Catholic Church has had a constant and visible influence on the political life of the country. How do you evaluate the fact that two societies with similar religious traditions should have pursued such different routes?*

Catholicism in Italy and Spain is an area where I, as a Swedish Lutheran atheist, am really out in deep water. Anyway, here again history and historical change have to be part of an answer. Both countries have Ghibelline as well as Guelfian periods. Anticlerical rule has alternated with clerical. The Spanish Cortes in Madrid are housed in a nationalized convent, and in Rome Giordano Bruno was resurrected in Campo de Fiori three centuries after the Inquisition burnt him there as a heretic. National Italy was actually established in a (swift) war against the Pope. However, against advice from the Curia, the Pope did not flee from Italy, and the Concordat with Mussolini reconciled the Italian nation-state and the universal Catholic Church. On the basis of this reconciliation the location of the Papacy gave the Church in Italy an institutional entrenchment comparable only to the few countries where the Church had played a central role in the national struggle, as in Ireland and in Poland. A second reason for the current difference between Italy and Spain is their divergent paths from Fascism. The Spanish Republic was anti-clerical, and the victorious Franco regime was intimately allied to the Church, in a way

Mussolini never was. With the later incorporation of Italian Fascism into the Nazi empire the distance from the Church widened. In other words, the Italian Church was less exposed in its accommodation to Fascism than the Spanish was to Francoism. Gradually, Spanish politics and society have moved faster and much more thoroughly away from its version of Fascism than Italy. In the early 2000s, the “Socialist” Zapatero government removed the last public Franco statues and busts, whereas last March the Italian Chamber of Deputies abstained even from debating a suggestion that now, on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Fascism, it might perhaps be time to do something about the Roman obelisk in Foro Italico close to the Foreign Office, with its all too visible inscription: “Mussolini Dux”.

*You seem to believe in a European system of values that is different from those to which we refer when speaking of the history of “civilisation”. At the same time you mention – and this seems a particularly suggestive point – a sort of European scepticism that can be observed in various areas of collective behaviour and which is not to be found in the rest of the world. This European mass psychology is however combined with a more statist view that Europeans hold of both government action and of institutions and, paradoxically, with a somewhat marked tendency among Europeans to individualism in their social relations. Would you agree that it is this very mixture of values is a positive characteristic of European culture that could offer other countries a useful social model and therefore give a new impulse to the political and cultural project of a United Europe in the eyes of the rest of the world?*

Civilizations, in the plural, I have found to be meaningful historical variables, as I have elaborated in my book *The World* (2011), although much caution is needed before invoking these ancient cultural configurations to explain latter-day conditions. The European civilization is unique in a special sense, i.e., combining a de-paganized secularism, from Greece and Rome, with (Christian) religion, of West Asian origin. While the Catholic Church wisely saw itself as the keeper of a pre-Christian high culture – from its languages to Aristotelian science, and on to Roman jurisprudence and the Republican Roman idea of elections to public office, the Pope included – this duality at the very core of European civilization also produced a creative tension and internal criticism – including critical philological studies of sacred texts, such as the Bible – coming to the fore in the Renaissance and in the Enlightenment.

Yes, we may also discern a specific European individualism and a specific European collectivism. The former is ancient, rooted in the family system, normatively – if actually frequently transgressed by the privileged – monogamous, with bilateral descent – save for the British aristocracy and some other outliers – with a Catholic norm of freedom to marry (and not to), and in north-western Europe, a norm of neolocality, meaning that a new couple should form its own household. All these norms and practices weakened patri-



archal authority and clannish allegiances, strengthening the position of young adults. Tribal belonging was further weakened by the crucial role of cities in European civilization, from Athens and Rome, revived in the High Middle Ages by city republics and leagues of cities, from Italy to the Hanse of the Baltic and northern Germany.

European collectivism was chosen and voluntary, and it developed upon the grounds of non-tribal and weak patriarchal individualism. Urban guilds developed also in the rest of the world, from Muslim West Asia to Confucian East Asia, and broad-based city republics tended to succumb rather soon to closed oligarchies and even dynasties. Weberian Occidentalism should be treated with cautious skepticism as well as polite respect. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine any non-European city celebrating itself as a collectivity in any way similar to what Venice does in its Doge palace, or to imagine Rembrandt's Amsterdam Nightwatch outside (Western) Europe. In brief, there was an old European urban civic tradition of collective effort and responsibility. In rural areas it had its equivalents in the communities of free farmers, who launched the Swiss Confederation (the Rütli Oath) and who gathered in the Nordic things (judicial assemblies).

However, in modern times, the European experience of class was decisive. Class became more prominent in Europe than anywhere else in the world for two reasons. One was the historical weakness or even absence of clans and tribes. The second was the European route to modernity which, uniquely in the world, was fought out by internal social forces only, albeit often in contexts of external wars, like the French Revolution being overdetermined by the Ancien Régime's indebtedness from its wars against Britain. The struggle for modernity in Europe pitted the nation/people against the Prince(s), the aristocracy, and the high clergy. The modern language of class – referring to internal divisions – arose out of this. The salience of class in Europe was further accentuated by the fact that Europe was both the pioneer of industrial capitalism and that part of the world where industrial labour had its widest extension. Out of this came the labour movement, but also other civic movements of social reform. And these movements did deliver. The welfare state was a European invention.

Summing up this long answer. Yes, I think there is much in the European tradition to be proud of, and feel inspired by, without ever forgetting or hiding the other side of Europe – the Inquisition, genocidal imperialism in the Americas and Australia, the slave trade, chauvinistic nationalism, racism, the scramble for colonial conquests and subjugation, the World War slaughters, Fascism, the GULAG and the Holocaust etc. Citizenship, democracy and elections, freedom to marry, criticism of sacred and other authoritative texts, human rights, collective movements of the exploited, the welfare state, and

transnational unions (though adumbrated in the Americas and in postcolonial Africa) were all invented in Europe.

The latter are all worth defending today and, alas, they do need defending. For the moment, at least, I don't see the EU as focused on standing up for them. A powerful part of it seems concerned, primarily, with a trade deal with USA, giving US corporations the right to challenge any European or national legislation they don't like, and with cutting welfare states as much as possible.

The European Union has always been a compromise, the very worst parts of the European legacy have not been taken on board, but there is enough malodorous baggage for any decent person to refrain from eulogies: capitalism, sub-imperialism, political elitism, systematic hypocrisy. The transnational union project has had a positive influence on the world, but currently it seems to have exhausted itself even in Europe. Cowardly conniving in the ever-expanding Israeli occupation of Palestine, participating in the destruction of Libya, abetting the civil war in Syria, substituting a low-intensity economic war against Russia for standing up for human rights in the Ukraine, Europe has lost its moral voice, anyway always hollow and insincere. Before anything more can be said to the world from a European platform, decent Europeans have to try to give new moral fibre to Europe.