THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20036-2188
Tel: 202-797-6000 Fax: 202-797-6004
www.brookings.edu

U.S.-EUROPE ANALYSIS SERIES
February 2006

Decadent Europe Revisited

Gilles Andréani, adjunct Professor at Paris II, Panthéon-Assas University*

The current deadlock in the European Union's constitutional process has provoked yet another period of deep euro-pessimism. It is worth noting that the concept of Europe has lived through similar periods in the past and survived them all, often growing stronger in the process. We need only re-read Raymond Aron's *Plaidoyer pour l'Europe décadente (In Defense of Decadent Europe)* published in 1976 to recall the dismal intellectual and strategic atmosphere of that moment: the stagflation, the appeal of Eurocommunism, and the apparent strategic ascendancy of the Soviet Union.

A project suggested to him by his publisher, the "*plaidoyer*", while not one of his most important works is nevertheless very useful given the current climate. It puts forth three distinct arguments:

- Part one, "Europe Mystified by Marxism" dwells on the contrast between the rejection of socialism by the dissident intellectual elite in the East and its embrace by Western intellectuals.

- The second part, "Europe Unconscious of her Superiority", is about the superior economic achievements of Europe, and more broadly, a criticism of "progressive" ideologies.

- Part three, "Europe-Victim of herself" deals with European worries about a possible crisis of Western civilization, marked by a decline of authority and a rejection of economic reality, and of the constraints of collective action.

Against this background, Aron concluded that Europe's future was not its own to decide: "The Europe at six [the European Community] is not a political entity. As far as the eye can see, it won't be one." In other words, the future of Europe is merely a function of the future of the West. Either the rest of the world allows itself to be transformed under the aegis of liberal capitalism, in which case the West may retain its leading edge, or "the disaggregation of the American imperial domain" would bring an enfeebled Europe under Soviet domination.

---

* A version of this paper was delivered at the Second Annual Raymond Aron Lecture at the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC on November 16, 2005.

The title, which Aron himself chose, is both ironic and misleading. The "*plaidoyer*" is not a plea in defense of Europe, retaining instead the dispassionate analytical quality of Aron's other works. It is much more a book on the West than on Europe. Aron was generally ill at ease with the concept of decadence. “Decadence,” he said, “either implies a value judgment or a scheme for the future.” He admired Spengler's work but resisted what he called "his biological pessimism.” If not a defense; not on Europe; and not about decadence; what does Aron's book have to say about the world thirty years after its publication?

The Plaidoyer remains a powerful testament to the European political and economic debate of the late seventies. It is also a reminder of how fast the relative fortunes of countries and systems can change. In retrospect, what appeared to Aron and others as a rising tide of perils for Europe looks like the turning of the tide in favor of liberal ideologies and Europe itself. Europeans played a distinct and important role in this transformation. The battle of ideas between the East and the West was, in many ways, fought and won in Europe. The exhaustion of ideology and a growing loss of faith were crucial factors in the successful outcome of the Cold War. That exhaustion was largely brought about by the change in attitudes in Western Europe, changes to which Aron's writings contributed. It was European voters and politicians who relegated the Italian and French communist parties to political insignificance. And it was the Solidarity movement in Poland (and the echo it found in Western Europe,) that dealt a final blow to the global appeal of communism.

The centrifugal forces in Eastern Europe coincided with the high-point of European integration between the 1986 Single European Act and the 1991 Maastricht Treaty. As these forces were at work in the East, a pole of attraction in the West gave these forces encouragement as well as a sense of direction. In 1989, the European Community seemed best suited to help the political and economic transformation underway in Poland and Hungary. A year later, it served as the best framework with which to accommodate a reunified Germany in the context of a more unified Europe.

Far from wallowing in decadence or drifting into submission to the Soviet Union, the Europe of the 1980s showed unity and resolve, not to mention a capacity to determine its own destiny (something neither Aron nor his generation could have foreseen). Writers on decline have of course been wrong before. In 1770 Voltaire wrote, “We live in a time of most awful decadence.” Fifteen years ago, many American scholars were obsessed with theories about U.S. decline in the face of structurally more efficient competitors like Japan. Past failures at prediction suggest that this latest wave of Euro-pessimism should be treated with skepticism.

Return to Uncertainty

Many Europeans have forgotten the “Euro-optimism” of the end of the Cold War, choosing instead to compare today’s events with those of the dark days of the late 1970s. The economic performance of the euro-zone has been mediocre at best. The EU has not yet become the international actor everyone expected it to be. Moreover, last year’s rejection of the European Union’s constitution by French and Dutch voters has reinforced doubts about Europe in the minds of many.

These developments have led to widespread skepticism, both within Europe and beyond. Externally, a fierce liberal—usually American—critique of Europe asserts that Europe will collapse under the weight, and expense, of its social model. Internally, there are intense domestic debates within each European country as to the purpose and scope of the European Union.

However, it is worth pointing out how much our perspective of Europe has changed from that of Aron. Thirty years ago, he could write a whole book on Europe without mentioning the European integration process except in passing and in the most dismissive way. It would be inconceivable today to speak about Europe without the European Union. Although today semantics tend to confuse the two, this is in itself indicative of the political ascendancy of integration in Europe since the late 1970s.

Second, the fiercest critiques of Europe today do not come from any global competitor of the West as a whole but from the United States or from inside Europe itself. In Europe, doubts about European integration have remained, and in many cases increased, even as the process deepened. In the United States, criticisms of the European Union are more constant, and in some cases indistinguishable from anti-European attitudes.

Europe, now as then, does not make her case well. As Aron argued thirty years ago, Europe remains largely unaware of her own superiority. But there are elements in the European integration process and in the European Union in particular which Europeans can be proud of. As Aron demonstrated, Europeans themselves often forget how far they have come and how much they have accomplished. Four areas in particular deserve special mention.

The first is peace. Although often viewed with incredulity, especially in the United States, arguments that the European integration process has brought peace to the continent are important. Indeed, Aron himself took issue with that claim. He saw the peace in post-war Europe as an imperial peace, a function of American protection. He called this a “peace of satisfaction": a slightly condescending term meant to describe a situation in which every country, having renounced claims vis-à-vis others, could enjoy a sort of slightly bourgeois and philistine sense of well-being.

Franco-German reconciliation, however, (of which Aron was an early supporter) left its imprint on Europe. It has marked the integration process with a profoundly peaceful ethos, one that has survived the era of American protection. That ethos has played a useful role in consolidating the peace, particularly in the case of the new Eastern European members. It has helped them moderate and occasionally solve simmering disputes that might otherwise have boiled over. And Europe and the European Union deserve credit for that.

The second area Europeans can be proud of is enlargement. The European Union has given its new members a sense of direction and a goal toward which to work. Within each individual country, that goal has been successful political and economic transformations. In this respect, EU enlargement has been a resounding success.

The third area is the single market and the euro. They have not only brought to Europe the benefit of a more integrated and competitive market, but they have also helped bring about the transformation of national economies that otherwise would not have been possible.

Finally, the European Union is emerging as a stabilizing force in world affairs. It is progressively asserting a more distinct international personality that involves much more than a blind trust in multilateralism, or a rationalization of Europe's own weakness. Rather, the European international personality combines features of realism and idealism in a unique way. From realism, it retains a belief in the virtues of traditional diplomacy, as well as a certain distrust of ideological efforts to remake the world. From idealism, it retains an acceptance of interdependence and the consequent limitations on sovereignty. This combination makes the European Union, if not a model for other states, at least an important moderating force in world affairs—no small virtue in today's world.

Would these achievements cause Aron to alter his conclusion that the European community would never become a political entity? European integration, in his view, arrived on the scene when the nation-states already had asserted themselves in Europe, and when it was too late to foster any real European unity. Of course, everything depends on what you call a political entity. If one looks at the European Union not as a federal state in the making but rather as a union of states, a *sui generis* international organization, it stands alone in the density and degree of cooperation it has created among its members. In this sense, it is a genuine political entity, although in a category by itself.

A Contradictory, Vulnerable Idea

Why, then, despite all of these accomplishments, are we now witnessing a loss of confidence in Europe on the part of European citizens? The European Commission’s opinion polls show a decline of 10 percentage points over the last 15 years in public support for the European Union.

There are a number of reasons for this decline. In a sense—to borrow again from Aron's vocabulary—Europe has been a victim of itself. Upholding a contradictory, vulnerable idea like “Europe” requires great care and modesty.

Europe is a contradictory idea because it values the autonomy of countries endowed with rich, old, and diverse personalities, at the same time as the need to bring them together, which requires discipline and leadership at the center.

Europe is a vulnerable idea, because at a time when people are in search of certainties, of limits, of boundaries, of clear definitions, the EU is by its very essence an undefined, or even undetermined, process. Its ultimate political form and membership have been left open, which naturally makes public opinion suspicious of the direction it will take and sometimes of the real motives of its promoters.

European governments have not treated this contradictory, vulnerable idea of Europe with the degree of care that it deserves over the last 15 years. Specifically, they have made four main mistakes.

First, they tried to bring about the new Europe on the cheap. They proclaimed new, ambitious goals for the European Union while keeping its budgetary and institutional means small.

Second, they have oversold what they have accomplished. In 1991, they proclaimed the European Community a "political union," despite having taken a rather modest step in political integration. In 2004, they promulgated as a "constitution" what was in fact merely an improvement on existing treaties. This contrast between words and deeds, between means and aims, has weakened the credibility of the European Union.

Third, they divided themselves publicly and bitterly over the question of war in Iraq, which brought disrepute to the European enterprise—an enterprise that, after all, is supposed to bring about an ethos of moderation and compromise in intra-European relations.

And finally, they have chosen to minimize and defer issues that were deeply troubling to European publics and to their sense of identity, particularly the issue of Turkish accession. They have downplayed and ultimately left unresolved the huge institutional dilemmas that enlargement brought about, overlooking the obvious fact that a union of 25 could only function if it was more, rather than less, integrated.

Of course, the mistreatment of the European integration project by European governments is understandable. European integration is a hard sell. After last year's constitutional debate, governments are likely to think twice before they expend more political capital on the idea of Europe.

This by no means implies the demise of the European Union, however. It will continue to function, but it will be quite some time—at least 18 months to two years—before the European governments address again the unresolved dilemmas that brought about the failure of the French and Dutch referenda.

Two deeper questions

Just as Aron's own doubts about Europe and the West thirty years ago show the analytical risk of too much pessimism, we may be guilty of too much complacency. Europe has yet to come to terms with what happened in France and the Netherlands. Could a lasting sense of impotence ensue for the Europeans? And the West too has to wonder about its continued relevance as a civilizational entity and as a framework for concerted political action. Two issues in particular which were at the heart of Aron's concerns thirty years ago are worth revisiting today.

The first is whether there are specific structural weaknesses which threaten Europe's role and position. Or, as Aron put it thirty years ago, is Europe rejecting its own economic reality? In a more competitive international context, that of globalization, European societies often hesitate at the scope and pace of the economic adjustments needed. They worry about the social costs and their effects on the fabric of their societies. The challenge of remaining meaningful political entities that are able to decide for themselves is certainly acutely perceived in most European countries.

The decline in support for the European Union is linked to these anxieties. The case for a European level of decision, and of political identity, is harder to make when economic decisions seem to flow from the global marketplace, and when national communities seem to provide a weakened, but still a tangible source of identity.

On the other hand, European publics are certainly more aware of economic realities than they were in the late 1970s, when across the board nationalizations still figured in the platforms of the French and British left. Inequality and diversity pose challenges to democracies in Europe, and elsewhere in the developed world. Individualism narrows the scope for collective action no less in the United States than in Europe. At least in this respect, there is still a West.

This leads us to the second issue on which Aron showed a lot of pessimism: that of the future of the West. He was wrong then (Western solidarity did flourish in the 1980s), but could he be right today? Aron's strategic judgment was that European unity mattered little. The important issue was Western unity in the face of the Soviet threat. He believed in the existence of an "Atlantic civilization", an expression he did not coin, but often used approvingly. He feared this Atlantic civilization was vulnerable to a systemic crisis and to the decline of America's leadership role. In effect, as Aron saw it, leadership required an imperial role for which he deemed the United States ill-suited, and which seemed to him severely impaired in the post-Vietnam years.

What should we make now of these two types of unity, strategic and civilizational, between the two sides of the Atlantic? They are still there but in a less obvious and compelling way. No direct military threat is there to unite us any more. Our alliance is now much more an option than a necessity.

As a rule, civilizational unity is more perceived from the outside, than felt from within, where national and other sources of identity naturally tend to prevail. The sense of a commonality between the two sides of the Atlantic is likely to continue to decrease without a common foe. Today our common enemies are few and are invisible networks rather than other states. Although we are determined to fight them together, dealing with the unknown is more divisive than standing up to the Soviet threat.

America and Europe have become a little more alien to each other in recent years. On the whole, Europeans tend to think of themselves as European rather than as Westerners. This is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, who would rather be the European of 1976, in a weak subset of the West within a divided continent, than a citizen of today's European Union? For all its shortcomings, today's Europe is more secure, united, prosperous and democratic than it ever was. A strange, incomprehensible, and at times exasperating animal, the European Union has contributed to this result in no small measure; certainly more than Aron had anticipated.

Nevertheless, from a transatlantic standpoint, there appears no easy conclusion to this situation. The Atlanticism of Aron, which stemmed from an impeccable assessment of the strategic and moral stakes of the cold war, made him underestimate the achievements of European integration and brought him close to accepting a subservient role for Europe. Both are difficult propositions for Europeans to accept today.

Nor is the slow estrangement currently dividing Europe and the United States something to which we should resign ourselves. For there remain deep commonalities, strategic, cultural and otherwise, across the Atlantic. And the world will probably be safer if Europeans and Americans continue to act together, rather than at cross purposes.

I am not sure that Aron's works contain remedies relevant to the ongoing withering of the Alliance, a problem obviously different from most of the transatlantic issues he had to deal with. But he valued the unity of the West above all and beyond its immediate strategic function, he sensed the limits of any imperial role in a world of nationalism. He accepted that the age where Europe occupied the center stage of world affairs had past but never fully trusted American democracy to provide the consistency that a leadership role required. In a much changed world, these arguments remain valid guidelines for anyone trying to discern answers to today's transatlantic dilemmas.