Review

A philosophy for Europe: From the outside

Roberto Esposito

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Given the widespread sense of disorientation concerning the present and future of the European project, one can only welcome a book like Roberto Esposito's *A Philosophy for Europe: From the Outside*. Whereas he affirms, quoting Nietzsche, that Europe today is in need of a 'grand politics' (p. 2), Europe is similarly in need of a 'grand philosophy,' one that traverses historical and spatial distances, intellectual traditions, and disciplines. Esposito attempts this in his own way by setting up a discussion on Europe and its relation to 'the outside.' This discussion spans the entire (continental) European philosophical tradition since the early twentieth century. Although this book is characterized by its own tensions and stumbling blocks, one must applaud and encourage Esposito's distinctive approach.

A Philosophy for Europe is structured in five parts, each containing three smaller chapters and accompanied by an interlude that connects the different parts to each other. The first part discusses the debates that occurred after the experience of World War I, which, according to philosophers and authors such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Paul Valéry, seemed to put the entire European philosophical project in crisis. These thinkers perceived the crisis of Europe as a properly metaphysical one, in the sense that the entire tradition of philosophical thought, somehow deceived by its own universalism and its reductive scientific outlook, was at the origin of the horrors of WWI. They were also convinced that Europe could only regain its place at the head of human civilization if it returned to its philosophical origin, where it could uncover the untainted truth of its own essence, be it in Greek thought or the rational (*logos*) attitude towards the world.

Opposed to this 'crisis dispositif,' Esposito positions Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and Patočka, who were convinced that no return to a European 'origin' was possible, simply because such an origin never existed. Instead, Europe had to face up to an uncertain future without being able to rely on the formulae of the past. Esposito also relates this position to Schmitt, who seemed to reverse the relationship between philosophy and politics: 'Schmitt had traced the decline of Europe, which others continued to interpret in a metaphysical key, to its loss of influence in the

new world order' (p. 43). This first part represents one of the highlights of the book, as Esposito manages to show the stakes of a philosophical discussion on Europe and its relation to itself and its outside, in a way that retains its vibrancy and relevance today [witness for instance Nietzsche's contempt for 'small-minded nationalism' and 'petty politics' (p. 34)].

Things slow down significantly in the next three parts, however, as Esposito investigates three European philosophical traditions that sprang up after World War II: 'German Philosophy,' 'French Theory,' and 'Italian Thought.' Esposito provides a sort of genealogy of these intellectual traditions, focusing on how they conceptualized the 'outside.' The part on German philosophy deals with the Frankfurt School, with special attention being paid to Adorno. Esposito discusses the Frankfurt School's theories on the relation of philosophy to the other sciences and to the social world. At the core of these discussions is the question of how individuals and the sciences are constituted, and relate to each other, in a world marked by social fragmentation and capitalist domination. In the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to uncover how the Enlightenment proclaims a break with the barbarism of myth and superstition (as its own outside), only by producing the same barbarism on a different plain.

The third part concerns French theory, most notably its 'post-modern' turn. As with Adorno and his German colleagues, French philosophers such as Lyotard and Derrida gained major influence by moving to the United States where they became intellectual rock stars. Esposito identifies two divergent strands in French theory, one influenced by Heidegger (Derrida and Nancy), and one by Nietzsche (Foucault and Deleuze). This divergence manifests itself in how they theorize 'the outside.' For Derrida, for instance, the outside is always already present within the inside, as an alterity that philosophy since Plato had attempted to expel from the inside (pp. 124–125). Foucault, on the other hand, theorizes the outside (madness) as something alien to the inside (reason), madness and reason being constructed by discourse practices. Esposito accurately sees in Foucault's method the influence of Nietzsche, who disavowed any trace of interiority in order to view history as an unfolding of unpredictable events far removed from any *arche* or *telos*.

Esposito's attention finally turns to Italian thought in part four. Situating its most profound breakthrough in Italian workerism (*operaismo*), Esposito develops its most important themes, one being the 'biological turn,' that is, the analysis of politics via the metaphors of biology: the politics of life and death (biopolitics and thanatopolitics), or community and immunity. This turn expresses a more 'affirmative' thought: political actors do not necessarily react to their outside in a secondary way, instead they can (and must) act creatively, out of their own accord (p. 169). Being a contributor to the Italian philosophical tradition himself, Esposito excellently presents its genealogy, from its precursors in Adriano Tilgher, Giuseppe Rensi and Giorgio Colli, to the discussions and theories that shaped contemporary Italian thought.

This brief overview omits too much to be anywhere near satisfactory, but it does allow us to highlight one of the main difficulties of this book. Firstly, in a relatively short span, Esposito covers an immensely wide range of authors and theories. It thereby often feels as if one receives a brief summary of an author, where it is up to the reader himself to go read the works referred to. Moreover, although the author clearly prefers certain traditions over others (Habermas and deconstructionism are not left unscathed), he offers no guide on how to finally understand one of the core themes of the book, 'the outside' itself. Rather, different theories are often put up next to each other like a collection whose particular relevance it is difficult to assess.

This brings us to the second difficulty, namely that there is no clear idea that ties together the investigations into philosophy's understanding of Europe with the analysis of the concept of 'the outside.' In parts two to four, Europe barely figures as a topic of interest at all. One remains in the dark on how these analyses could contribute to a 'philosophy *for* Europe,' as something distinct from European philosophy in general. In this sense, for instance, Esposito does not succeed in making Adorno relevant for a time of renewed politicization in Europe (as opposed to anywhere else in the world), and this goes for Foucault or Derrida as well. Esposito's analyses are often excellent and illuminating, but readers seeking a specific program for a philosophy for Europe may feel they did not get what they came for.

In a sense, the fifth and final part of the book is more strongly connected to the first part. Stating that 'we had to wait until the events of 1989 for a shared thought on Europe to begin' (p. 12), Esposito lucidly analyzes the contemporary discussions on Europe. In Germany, this discussion revolved around Habermas and his interlocutors on the feasibility and normative preferability of the post-national constellation. In France, deconstructionist approaches stressed that Europe should be defined 'not in itself but by its otherness' (p. 213). Esposito convincingly shows that an overemphasis on stripping Europe from a more-or-less stable identity also makes it dangerously apolitical: 'How can we construct a philosophy of Europe with the capacity to define its profile and guide its path, if we always refer to what it is not' (p. 215)? In contrast to this trend, Esposito draws attention to another French tradition, headed by Gauchet, Manent, and Balibar, who explicitly theorize Europe from a politicized perspective. Finally, Esposito shows that Italian authors have interrogated the European constellation vis-à-vis older political concepts such as 'empire' and 'sovereignty.' This discussion closes with Esposito's most explicit endorsement of a political strategy that he finds in Italian thought: 'The process of Europe's political unification will not be the fruit of agreements between summits, but the result of a real political dialectic' (p. 232), meaning that political European integration can only come about by a movement that shifts political conflict to the European level from the bottom-up.

It should come as no surprise that Esposito doesn't provide any ready-made formulae for Europe's future. Instead, he offers a philosophical reflection on the rich multiplicity within the European philosophical tradition. He also manages to highlight some of its more promising pathways. In doing so, he at times loses focus of what unites the investigation of the outside with a philosophy for Europe. At its best, however, we are reading one of the most well-versed theorists on European philosophy outlining the stakes of the uncertain predicament Europe is facing today.

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