Chapter Five

Orientalizing America: Habermas and the Changing Discourse of Europe

The European Union is a set of institutions without being at the same time the object of a collective imagination. Citizens know that the EU exists, but it is a body without a strong meaning attached to it. The outright rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty by French and Dutch voters in 2005 has reminded the public once more of the amazing gap between the capacity of the Union to pull countries into its orbit and its equally impressive inability to construct a shared “horizon of meaning” for its citizens or anything close to a “dramatic representation of its destiny.” In short, Europe suffers from a symbolic deficit.

This is the point of departure for Jürgen Habermas and other authors, whose writings on Europe should be understood as interpretive efforts aimed at giving meaning to the institutional complexity and evolving nature of European integration. These efforts are ultimately about applying the cultural

---

scheme of European civility and its opposites to international affairs. Intellectuals have made the EU—currently comprised of twenty-seven member states—into the symbolic center of a binary discourse that not only distinguishes between Europe and non-Europe, but also identifies at least some nonmembers of the EU as essentially inferior. In this context, “Europe” has become a serious subject not just for lawyers or policymakers, but also for political philosophers, including those who count themselves among critical theorists. Since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1991, the eastern enlargement of the EU, and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, we have witnessed numerous contributions both on the philosophical concept of Europe and the institutions of the European Union. In the decades before, “Europe” was mostly perceived as an ends-oriented, fairly effective technocratic institution working for the benefit of almost everybody. Today, the EU is increasingly presented instead as an end-in-itself, a community with a particular set of values and a political identity of its own. Accordingly, public discourse has shifted from stressing the “sameness” of Europeans within a larger family of Western nations to highlighting the “differentness” of Europe vis-à-vis the world in general, and the United States in particular.2

As in earlier eras, intellectuals apply the normative code of civil versus uncivil societies to entire countries, political cultures or mentalities. These new global civil narratives do not evolve gradually, but in leaps, as dramatic political circumstances and crises usher in periods of intense meaning-making. An example is the global civil discourse surrounding the beginning of the US-led war against Iraq in 2003, when Habermas and other Continental intellectuals interpreted the massive anti-war rallies all over Europe as a symptom of rising popular enthusiasm for “Europe” as opposed to “America.” Since then, many European intellectuals have sought to reassert Europe as harbinger of a global idealpolitik that connects European civil society with a counter-hegemonic foreign policy. At the same time, Habermas has insisted that the

2 I should add that this public discourse on differences between “Europe” and “America” does not necessarily translate into policies, not even at the symbolic level of United Nations resolutions. See, for example, V. Heins et al., “The West Divided? A Snapshot of Human Rights and Transatlantic Relations at the United Nations,” Human Rights Review, vol. 11, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–16.