THE CONCEPT OF EUROPE, AND BEYOND:
EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIPS AND THE INTERNET

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I.

Now that the European Union covers most of the European continent, we are confronted with the question of whether this union is approaching its final borders or whether the process of the European unification should strive for the integration of countries on or beyond the borders of the European continent. Although this question has been on the agenda since at least 1959 when Turkey applied for accession to the European Economic Community, it is now becoming more and more important with respect to the other immediate neighbours of the European Union, ie. Russia and the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. In the following I will concern myself only with the latter.

The use of the term "Europe" or "European" by the European Union and its predecessors was programmatic from the outset when such organisations were founded as the "Western European Union" established in 1948, the "Council of Europe" in 1949, the "European Coal and Steel Community" in 1951, the "European Economic Community" in 1957, etc. It is noteworthy that the division of Europe by the Iron Curtain is manifest only in the name of the first of these organisations. It would be hard to deny that the label "European" made it easier for the advocates of an enlargement of the European Union to press their case as long as the country in question was situated primarily on the European continent; but this label will make it harder to argue in favour of the accession of other countries in the future.

Let us take a closer look at the terminology: in ordinary language the word "Europe" denotes a geographic entity that forms the western appendix of Asia, although some people are inclined to exclude the British Islands. Apart from this meaning, "Europe" or its synonym "Occident" may also refer to a cultural entity to which most of the people living on the European continent are held to belong. Of course the cultural concept is in fact broader and vaguer than the geographic. In several cultural aspects Northern Europe is closer to Northern America, Australia and New Zealand than to Spain, Greece and (Asian) Cyprus; and as well the huge landmass of Russian Asia is at least as much European as urban Latin America and even some towns in South and South-West Africa. Another term that comes close to this meaning of "Europe" is the term "The Western World", denoting the most industrialised nations ruled by democratic governments. But in this respect there exists no good justification for the exclusion of a country as culturally different as Japan from the Western World. However, the vagueness of the concepts of "Europe", the "Occident" or the "Western World" does not matter in many contexts and may even be an advantage relieving us from the necessity of making more accurate distinctions that would still be arbitrary. Words may serve their purpose perfectly without having precise borders.

At first sight, the geographic aspect of the term "Europe" appears to be the primary. -- But towards the east Europe has no real natural border. The Ural is not much higher than the Black Forest; and without the Reconquista we would today not rate Gibraltar as one of Europe's borders but the Pyrenees instead. Our perception of the Mediterranean Sea as an important geographic border would not have been so obvious for a citizen of the Roman

Empire. It seems that the geographical meaning of the term "Europe" is essentially dominated by its political and cultural connotations, especially by the idea that most inhabitants of the European continent may be held to share common values and a similar life style, apart from the all too obvious differences between them.

When after the Second World War institutions were formed with a view to curbing the rivalries between former enemies and replacing the direct confrontations and bilateral negotiations of the past with an elaborated multilateral system of commissions and regulations for the future, the term "Europe" almost recommended itself for this associations because it vaguely appealed to the similarities between the participants without demanding too much affinity, it held the door open for other potential members and at the same time asserted the claim of the western democracies to be forming the ideal for the whole of the continent.

The central goals of these organisations have been politico-economic. The European Union constitutes an efficient institution for peace-keeping and for economic prosperity among its member states based on the appreciation of human, civil and minority rights, of individual freedom, market economy and democratic self government. Hence, the geographical and cultural connotations of the term "Europe" are of little significance here. They are only important in so far as geographic or cultural criteria contribute to establishing, securing and enhancing stability and prosperity among the member states.

These politico-economic goals of the European Union are so general that a majority of people, independently of their cultural background can agree with them -- if not in all details, then at least in principle. In this respect the affiliation with a certain culture is irrelevant for the question of whether a particular country is qualified for membership in the European Union.

The relevance of cultural differences for a future European Union depends on the general shape of the union as we envisage it. A union that is still dominated by individual nation states can more easily tolerate diverse ways of living than a powerful body politic that is authorised to regulate homogeneously many of the circumstances of its citizens' lives. As long as we do not want the European Union to be a melting pot and as long as its member states are left to act in relative autonomy, cultural differences are of minor importance. As long as we do not strive for building a European equivalent of the United States of America, there is less pressure on an individual member state to adapt its own standards to those of the others.

In this perspective the major barriers for an expansion of the European Union beyond the borders of the European continent are only politico-economic. The political issues include such phenomena as authoritarian regimes, corruption and nepotism, the deficits in pluralism, rule of law and respect for human rights in most of its neighbouring countries. However, it would be too fatalistic to suppose that a certain culture is predestined for a certain political system, as has often been alleged for the Arab world. It would be too pessimistic to believe that it is its fate forever to remain in the current condition. And it is not only Islamism that is inspiring these societies: their youth are dreaming about a life like in Europe.

But even if social and democratic reforms are carried forward, the economic backwardness of these countries would impede their accession to the European Union for the foreseeable future. They would put too great a strain on the whole system of financial support of the

weaker countries in the European Union by the richer. The shared benefits for all participants, that have recommended this policy, would be called into question. In simple words: Such a union would be too expensive for the richer countries. Furthermore, if freedom of movement would be granted for every citizen, the richer countries must fear unchecked immigration.

Migration is, by the way, the only important issue where the natural borders of the European continent represent a reason against the expansion of the European Union towards the south: The Mediterranean Sea serves as a comparatively difficult obstacle for any attempt of irregular immigration. But geographic proximity in general calls, if not directly for an expansion of the European Union in this direction, than at least for an actively formed neighbourhood with a sense of high responsibility. Not only out of mere human or cultural affinity, but also out of an enlightened self-interest: Democracy, stability and prosperity in the states at the European Union's periphery would also strengthen the same for the European Union itself.

II.

Regarding its Mediterranean neighbours, the European Union has taken a course of building a system of alliances. The first milestone was the formation of a European-Mediterranean Partnership in Barcelona in 1995, joined by ten partners from outside the European Union. It had been supplemented by various bilateral treaties of association with most of these partners individually. In 2008 the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, initiated the formation of a Union for the Mediterranean. Despite its name it includes not only countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea but all members of the European Union, 15 other states, and the Palestinian Authority. The Arab League and Libya as a state hold observer status.

Its founding document, the Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean (Paris, 13 July 2008), begins with the words: "Europe and the Mediterranean countries are bound by history, geography and culture. More importantly, they are united by a common ambition: to build together a future of peace, democracy, prosperity and human, social and cultural understanding." (§ 1). The major fields of cooperation in 2009 had been outlined a few months later, during the Marseille Meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministers of Foreign Affairs (3-4 November 2008). The Final Statement of this meeting mentions: "a political and security dialogue", "maritime safety", "economic and financial partnership", "social, human and cultural cooperation".

If such a Union for the Mediterranean should gain a similar momentum as the European Union has obtained, then it is among other things mandatory to strengthen the direct ties between the citizens of the European Union and the citizens of the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The "Euro-Mediterranean Media Partnerships", an initiative in which I have been involved and already started in 2003 between Universities from Germany (Universität Karlsruhe, Hochschule der Medien Stuttgart), France (Université de Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens), Tunisia (Université de Sousse, Université La Manouba - Tunis) and Marocco (Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi in Tanger-Tétouan) wants to meet this challenge. In the context of this

initiative a project under the label 2MOD funded by the German Academic Exchange Service had been conducted by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of Karlsruhe University, the University of Sousse and the Department of Humanities at La Manouba University during the years 2005 to 2008. This project aimed to foster the academic exchange of researchers and students across cultural boundaries by personal contacts for enduring professional, project-oriented collaboration. [For the background and details of the 2MOD project see Thum (2009), Schütt (2009) and Schneider (2009).]

The label 2MOD was chosen because the project included two modules that we considered a potential paradigm for other initiatives that also aim at fostering inter-cultural knowledge transfer and understanding. The first module focused on topics in the common history of the two cultural realms (especially in the history of ideas) as well as on the description and assessment of predominant current discourses in Germany and Tunisia. These subjects were examined in each case from both, a European and an Arab perspective. We expect that the collaboration of German and Tunisian students further develops their ability for intercultural comparison as well as shared world views in culture and politics.

The second module was inspired by the idea of using Internet technology for promoting mutual understanding beyond cultural borders. However, we did not rely exclusively on new technologies but instead considered them as very helpful adjuncts to ordinary face-to-face meetings. Groups of students and professors paid regular short visits to each other for combined workshops. The joined workshops were enframed by preparative and follow-up workshops of each group separately at home. During this time we used the course management system (CMS) "moodle" as a digital workspace that allowed German and Tunisian students to share their course essays with each other, encouraged them to comment on other student's texts online and to revise their own papers accordingly. This approach allowed us to implement a permanent and effective exchange programme with modest financial means. It had not only an impact on the participating students, but also strengthened the ties between the academics of the participating departments and thus increased their sensibility for cross-cultural issues related to their own general field of research.

Essential for the success of the project was a strict parity among the participants. Both, the German and the Tunisian partners, had been equally responsible for all important aspects of the project. The result was a truly mutual dialogue and knowledge transfer. Economic underdevelopment does not imply cultural backwardness. From the mere fact that the public education of the population in Northern Africa is considerably lagging behind most European countries we must not infer that their intellectual elites are inferior to ours. We as the German partners received at least as much as we provided.

We consider it an advantage of our approach, in comparison to other cross-cultural initiatives regarding the Arab world, that its perspective is broadly cultural and not only centered around religious topics. In other words, we tried to avoid the all too often stereotypically emphasised religious contrast between a Christian Occident and a Muslim Orient. Instead we discovered how much we have in common from the Greek philosophers through the Roman empire up to the works of Augustine of Hippo and all the mutual impacts between Orient and Occident thereafter.

Another advantage of our approach is its project-centred character. It has not just been a dialogue between experts who inform each other about their diverging world views. Instead, our collaboration took the form of multiprofessional team work where the different backgrounds of the participants were not obstacles that had to be overcome, but brought an increasing diversity in each one's understanding of the topics we covered. Such an understanding needs time to develop. Therefore it was of particular importance that this initiative has been embedded in an institutional frame that facilitates long term liaisons.

All in all, we believe that the strategy we adopted could serve as a paradigm for how digital media could be used for cross-cultural academic research, teaching and similar activities in other domains.

Literature

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