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Elastic and Explosive Europe at a Time of War:

How Can We Rethink European Cleavages and Linkages?

Nadège Ragaru

Abstract: Once upon a time, in 1989–1991, European elites and citizens seemed to know that Europe existed, and they hoped that the continent would get reunited. Since then, several map-making efforts have taken place. Changing lists of (often normative) cleavages and linkages have been drawn to portray the political, economic, and societal evolutions affecting the region. Today, however, attempts at comparing and contrasting intra-European experiences offer only limited access to the radical changes that are taking place in Europe. Where do democracies/authoritarian regimes start and end? Are foreign policy alignments reminiscent of a (new) Cold War? At stake is not the identification of dominant divisions/ties, similitudes/differences, etc. Rather, a central issue lies in our ability to abandon the classification-based modes of knowledge production inherited from the 18th century and to invent new ways of thinking about an era that is both elastic and explosive.

Keywords: Europe, cleavages, Far Right, hybrid war, social media platforms, knowledge

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There are moments in history when the terminology, the categories, and the tools we use to make sense of the world reach a state of obsolescence.[1] I believe we are experiencing such a moment. Our way of thinking, built around walls, doors, and other architectural metaphors, crystallized somewhere in the 17th–18th century, at the time when human ambitions to comprehend and systematize the world blossomed. It is perhaps best illustrated by the controversy that opposed two major figures in the field of natural history, the Swedish physician and biologist Carl Linnaeus and the French *intendant* of the king's garden, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon.[2] At the time, the dominant question was: How can the world be comprehended, organized, and formalized? Linnaeus won this intellectual dispute: the world was to be known through classification and taxonomy, creating strictly discrete categories and hierarchies. Buffon had argued in favor of a more nuanced vision of the living world. He had advocated a patient observation of nature, an attention to varieties and variations, and a sensitivity to what could not be neatly attributed to specific species. To little avail. The notion of walls we are discussing at the present conference, if we understand walls both as physicality and as metaphors, is largely heir to Linnaeus' worldview.

Since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 22, 2024, and with the (ir)resistible rise of the Far Right across Europe — East and West included, and most recently on the occasion of the first round of presidential elections in Romania — the long-reassuring categories employed to decipher cleavages and alliances worldwide, to classify political regimes, as well as to assess the likelihood of wars are unraveling. Political science, as a discipline, had taught us what a democracy is, how representative regimes came into existence and why some of them died. In the last years, observers have added to the word "democracy" a flurry of adjectives in the hope of rescuing established typologies.[3] The notion of "populism" has gained such wide currency that it suffered conceptual overstretch. International Relations — albeit an increasingly institutionalized field — is at pains to capture the present-day geopolitical (dis)orders. After 1989, the legacy of applying Cold War lenses to conflictuality — that is, at the time, overfocusing on nuclear threats and deterrence — caused significant delays in understanding the return of conventional war to Europe (in Yugoslavia). After 2001, the war on terror and the fear of "radicalization" captured attention to the point of foregoing

[1] The author wishes to thank David Alan Rich for his priceless comments on an earlier version of this text.
[2] For a recent retelling of this controversy, see Jason Roberts, *Every Living Thing: The Great and Deadly Race to Know All Life*. London: Riverrun, 2023.
[3] One of the most discussed conceptual innovations was that of "illiberal democracy," popularized by Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, 76, no. 6, Nov.-Dec. (1997): 22–43, at: http://fareedzakaria.com/articles/other/democracy.html

studies of conventional interstate conflicts. A few years ago, however, some eminent scholars of violence rang the alarm: the social logics of violence were becoming increasingly complex and blurred; their intensity, unfathomable.[4] Academic responses to these challenges have been slow in coming. Each passing day brings new developments that resist interpretation, and no clock seems to be able to stabilize what is perceived as an inexorable acceleration of time. In early December 2024, it took less than a dozen days for Islamist militant rebels, led by Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Most observers now wonder: when and where will the next conflict emerge?

In the time offered to me, I will make no pretense of providing a new grand interpretative scheme that would do away with conventional classification patterns. Rather, I would like first to explore the multiple travels of "walls" in Europe since the end of the Cold War, walls being understood here as metaphors that have served to depict Europe, the European Union (EU) and its member states. Second, the ensuing rejection of binaries (*id est* wall thinking) will invite a reflection on the existence of social and political commonalities across Europe (and beyond). Some of the transnational social processes and mechanisms that underpin these parallel developments stop at no wall and knock at no door. They are part and parcel of a social reality we are cognizant of, but seem to have failed to organize into a meaningful totality until today.

I. Ever-changing, ever-present walls in Europe: Ordering, identifying, and creating hierarchies since 1989

Once upon a time – that is, during the Cold War, that bygone era – Europe was neatly divided by a wall between East and West, capitalism and socialism, Western democracies and authoritarian members of the communist bloc. On both sides of this divide, a moral economy supported these cleavages: a vision of good and evil, of past, present, and future. True, the seclusion was never complete; even during the Stalin era, some countries built upon this dichotomous world to promote alternative paths (Yugoslavia foremost[5]) and reach out to the global world through the non-aligned movement, for instance. Even in countries that were perceived as the most subservient to the USSR, such as Bulgaria, attempts were made at

[4] Hamit Bozarslan, "Quand la violence domine tout mais ne tranche rien: réflexion sur la violence, la cruauté et la Cité," *Collège international de Philosophie*, nos. 85–86 (2015): 19–35.
[5] For a stimulating approach to Yugoslavia's non-aligned cultural policy, see the documentary film by Mira Turajlić, *Non Alignés: scènes des archives Labudović*, Serbia, France, Croatia, Montenegro, Qatar, 2022, 100 min.

promoting global cultural policies that transcend these divisions.[6] During late socialism, circulations and links between East and West encompassed the fields of culture (cinema, music, etc.), science, and daily life.[7]

1. The fall of socialism and the reordering of European hierarchies

Then 1989 came, and, for a short period of time, the belief prevailed that walls would physically and symbolically disappear. Most observers called for and hoped for the reunification of Europe. East and West Germany merged in a way that would later foster an amount of bitterness and misunderstanding that went unforeseen at the time. The EU embarked on a process of enlargement to the East, which took the form of EU accession talks decided at the Luxembourg (1997) and Helsinki (1999) European Council meetings. Soon enough, new dividing lines were drawn and walls returned. This time, the binary contrast was between those states deemed most advanced on the path to market democracy and EU integration, such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech republic, and the Baltic states, and the so-called laggards, Bulgaria and Romania, in the first place, with Slovakia at some point. A diversity of arguments, at times culturalist and not devoid of condescension, were brought to the fore to explain these differing tempos. The very modes of extraction from socialism and the effects of "path dependency" completed this portrayal of the new symbolic map of Europe.

Nevertheless, in 2004, 2007, and 2013, Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU. At long last, the former East-West divide was overcome. No more walls were to be erected in Europe, and those states that had taken a belated start were to join the EU – that is, normality, that is, democracy and prosperity – step by step. Or nearly so. There was still a temptation, here and there, to contrast the "new" democracies with the "old" democracies, the freshly established from the consolidated ones, the "new" and the "old" EU members. Old habits of mind die hard, and so do normative hierarchies. Nevertheless, these were years of moderate optimism. Gradually, all EU member states would converge; transfers and learning effects were the key terms of the day.

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[6] Theodora Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins. A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.

[7] Małgorzata Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022; Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, eds. *Art Beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*, Budapest: Central University Press, 2016; Justine Faure and Sandrine Kott, eds., "Le bloc de l'Est en question," *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 109 (2001): 3–200. These circulations also transpire from several volumes dedicated to the cultural history of socialism: David Crowley and Susan Reid, eds. *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, Oxford & New York: Berg, 2002; David Crowley and Susan Reid, eds. *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Socialist Bloc*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010.

2. Democracy with an adjective: when the "good pupils" become authoritarian states

By the mid-2010s, optimism was gone. Walls were back – within the EU this time. There were discussions of democratic regression. Countries like Hungary and Poland were seen as experiencing a form of backlash, with populism and authoritarian leaderships as their propellers. How could these evolutions be accounted for? That precisely these countries, the very countries that had long been perceived as the most open (Hungary) or rebellious states (Poland) in the 1980s and most diligent and successful in their transitions to democracy and capitalism, should question the newly established democratic institutions, denounce the predatory appetites of western corporations, and embark on a path of re-writing history could not be easily understood. Should the reasons behind these developments be found in deeper layers of time, the *longue durée* of the interwar era (not fully democratic, indeed)?[8] Or should reasons behind these evolutions be located in the moment of 1989 itself?[9] Could it be that, blinded by their enthusiasm, scholars, observers, and citizens alike had failed to see that the revolutions and social mobilizations of 1989 were not devoid of failings, and that (excessively intense?) national sentiments were behind part of the opposition to socialism? 1989, after all, may not have been that liberal.

3. The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

However, it was the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 22, 2024, an invasion most scholars and decision-makers had failed to anticipate, that marked a decisive turning point. Once more, walls set out on a new journey: the Russian war on Ukraine indeed fostered a relative decoupling between being pro-democratic and pro-Western. A country like Poland, which was highly supportive of Ukraine, welcoming over a million Ukrainian refugees,[10] using all its leverage within the EU to encourage sanctions towards Russia and serving as a key conduit of military assistance to Ukraine, could have democratic failings. Meanwhile, other countries, Hungary foremost, stayed on the twin course of authoritarianism and pro-Russian

[8] For an alternative reading on the reasons behind the success of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, see Antonela Capelle-Pogacean, "Avis de tempête sur le 5e gouvernement Orbán," 08.09.2022, at: https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/avis-de-tempete-sur-le-5e-gouvernement-orban

[9] Paul Betts, "1989 at Thirty: A Recast Legacy," *Past & Present* 244, no. 1 (2019): 271–305.

[10] In June 2024, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland who were given temporary protection status was estimated at 965,775, Poland ranking second only after Germany (1,347,725). See Statista, "Nombre de réfugiés ukrainiens bénéficiant du statut de protection temporaire par pays en Europe suite à l'invasion de la Russie en juin 2024," at: https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/1295718/nombre-refugies-guerre-ukraine-europe/

diplomacy. At long last, one had to admit that democracy and domestic modes of government needed to be dissociated from geopolitical orientation – at least, in part.

The war also prompted significant attempts at reconsidering the contours, as well as the internal linkages and divisions, within Europe. Ukraine, long considered a "neighboring country" in EU parlance, was brought in. Its symbolic re-positioning on the European map found its most concrete expression in the decision of the European Council to grant Ukraine the status of EU candidate on June 23, 2022, and to open accession negotiations on December 14, 2023. Concomitantly, within European academic milieus, present (and past) cartographies were critically reconsidered. While several journals and research groupings changed their names, because former designations too strongly reflected the Russo-centric reading of Soviet and Russian history which had long dominated,[11] scholars advocated a de-colonization of Russian and Soviet studies, a new creolization of knowledge, and a retelling of the past in which peripheries took center stage.[12] That this diligent transformation betrayed the fear among a handful of scholars that, with the loss of access to Russian archives, their research field might become elusive is a variable that cannot be entirely excluded. Some academics felt they needed a new angle. Others wished to engage in a thorough reconsideration of their understanding of Ukraine and renew the sources with which its history could be told. New curricula were created in universities, and several academic institutions, while welcoming Ukrainian refugees for short- and mid-term stays or long-term expatriation, reinforced their offerings in Ukrainian language courses.

The final blow to the (until then) prevailing classifications was dealt by the West. Western democracies had long been praised as a model for the newcomers to the EU: they were "consolidated" and had the benefit of hindsight. Yet, authoritarianism was on the rise in some west European countries, and the supposed irreversibility of democracy in states where such regimes had prevailed for a certain amount of time was being thoroughly questioned. This development took everyone by surprise. Not the existence of xenophobia, the distrust and even disgust towards governing elites, and the radicalization of large segments of western societies. No, what observers discovered was that the Far Right were no longer protest parties. They were ready and willing to govern.

[11] In France, for instance, the *Cahiers du monde russe* (EHESS) was renamed *Cahiers d'histoire russe, est-européenne, caucasienne et centrasiatique*. Meanwhile, the Research group *GDR Rus* took up the designation of *GDR Est* — a notion whose multiple connotations are not devoid of ambivalence.

[12] On the reassessment of historiography in the field of art history, see Stefaniia Demchuk and Illia Levchenko, "Decolonizing Ukrainian Art History," *Nationalities Papers* (Nov. 2024): 1–25.

Up until a couple of years ago, no political scientist in Paris would have supported the idea that "old" European democracies too could undergo a de-democratization process. I still remember the time when colleagues felt uneasy, if not outright shocked, when I insisted in my talks that corruption was not the exclusive precinct of Central and Southeast Europe, but also affected Western Europe. I could read on their faces a mark of disbelief, coupled with a slight note of derision. They did not believe it either – it might be fairer to say that they minimized the impact of the elections – when the Far Right came to power in Italy in October 2022. After all, Giorgia Meloni, the new Italian prime minister, was pro-western and only moderately Eurosceptic. By June 2024, France was added to the list of the countries tilting towards the Far Right, in spite of its majoritarian electoral system. In two years, the French *Rassemblement national* (National Rally, RN) had seen its number of parliamentarians jump from 88 to 125.[13] Although Marine Le Pen's party fell short of the number of seats required for a majority (289) in the French National Assembly, they could block any legislation not to their liking. On December 4, with the support of parties of the left, the RN even managed to topple the rightwing government of Michel Barnier, appointed by president Macron three months earlier, in a no confidence vote. In September of the same year, both Germany and Austria demonstrated they were no exceptions to the shift to the extreme right of the political spectrum of Europe: the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) had already made strong headways in June 2024 on the occasion of the European elections, finishing second with a surge in both votes and seats (four additional seats, 15 out of a total of 96). Its popularity was confirmed at the September 1 regional elections in Thuringia: the AfD became the largest party, with 32.8% of the votes, an unprecedented result since 1945.

In view of these developments, the time may have come to realize that most of the binaries we applied to the deciphering of politics, electoral preferences, and political regimes in Europe are no longer adequate: old – new democracies; post-communist – liberal states; large – small, rich – poor countries, etc. Wall thinking will not do anymore. An alternative approach might be to cautiously examine some of the commonalities European states share today. The second part of this talk will endeavor to open this discussion at three levels: first, that of political representation and political elites; second, that of individuals; and third, in the field of knowledge.

[13] Available at: https://www.archives-resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/resultats/legislatives2024/ensemble_geographique/index.php

II. Trans-European trends: Institutions, individuals, and "deep" truth

1. State making as Organized crime: the reshaping of political elites

In 1985, Charles Tilly penned a book chapter titled "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," that would become a classical piece.[14] In this provocative text, he explored the interplay between war-making, extraction, protection rackets, and the making of national states in modern Europe. National states, he argued, needed to be considered as the craft of "coercive self-seeking entrepreneurs." The ability to forge enemies and foes allowed dominant entrepreneurs to extract resources from citizens in exchange for the protection they pretended to extend upon them. The kind of regime that resulted from these power relationships depended on the ability of the protected clients to negotiate a certain amount of redistribution and the allocation of rights.

Despite the leap in time, Tilly's analysis may help us to grasp some of today's dynamics. What we are witnessing is indeed a transformation in the balance of power that underpinned the creation of modern states and, even more so, the emergence of the welfare state in the 20th century. To put it boldly, extraction might well be on the rise. Similarly, the notion of "coercive self-seeking entrepreneurs" may aptly portray some trends in the recruitment of contemporary political elites. In Europe today, one might be tempted to argue that the political class is slowly dwindling – if by "political class" one means a set of professionalized actors whose goal is to promote public interest and defend an idea of the common good.

How did it all happen? In recent decades, the globalization and financialization of capitalism have fostered closer interactions, if not collusions, between the political and economic sectors. As a result of at times unrelated and even unintended processes – including the wish to open the political arena to entrepreneurs, branded as representatives of "civil society" – an increasing number of businessmen have entered the political arena. Seen from their perspective, such a move was not devoid of pertinence. Why invest in lobbying efforts to advance business interests when it was possible to take part in the writing and the adoption of laws? Meanwhile, some oligarchs have reached the highest echelons of the state. The fact that they are millionaires (or billionaires) has not prevented them from successfully adopting anti-elite speech and posturing as alternatives to corrupt politicians. Whether at the level of

[14] Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in eds. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol. *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 169–191.

parliaments or presidencies, this shift in the recruitment of political leaders has accelerated the widening of the social contrasts between the rulers and the ruled – a parameter central to the very existence of representative democracy.

This evolution may appear surprising, especially in light of recent public discussions about the need for a closer fit between the racial, gender, and social identities of the citizens and that of the people who speak on their behalf. Two decades ago, Bruno Latour addressed the conundrum of representative democracies: How can a few hundred parliamentarians' ambitions represent dozens of millions of citizens? How can one and the same elected official convey the demands of such diverse individuals as a lower-middle class retired woman and a wealthy mid-career banker? The answer, he then argued, resided in their ability to "curb" political speech – adjusting their discourse to the citizens and the social concerns they were discussing.[15] At a time when social inequalities are dramatically increasing in Europe (and beyond), such an exercise seems more challenging than ever.

It remains to be explained why voters cast their electoral choice for people whose personal means, daily lives, and challenges differ so markedly from theirs. Insisting that large segments of the citizenry believe in the narrative promoted by a number of corporate leaders turned into politicians – as heads of states, they will replicate the successes they have achieved as CEOs – offers too limited an answer. An alternative option might be worth considering: in the present-day world, that is, in a world in which individual identities are multiple and ever changing, some citizens may not vote for candidates who resemble them. They may opt for people who embody one of their possible selves. A shift to the individual level will help to clarify this point.

2. Empowered / disempowered citizens: All-powerful, all powerless citizens

A few weeks ago, while passing by a store, I heard the following lyrics: "You're dead. Stay dead. Stay dead." I did not know the song, but the formulation caught my ear and stayed with me: "stay dead" – that is, you might not do so; you might be revived. Being granted multiple lives, one might experience several deaths. A quick Internet search (after all, this is the world we all live in) showed that the sentence featured in the song "You're Dead," was written in the 1960s by pop singer, song writer, and painter Norma Tanega (1939–2019), with

[15] Bruno Latour, "Si l'on parlait un peu politique?" *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, no. 58 (2002): 143–165.

a view to denouncing competition on the New York music scene. In 2014, the song got a new lease on life when it was used in the opening scene of the soundtrack of a vampire comedy, *What We Do in the Shadows* (New Zealand & Australia) by Jemaine Clement and Taika Wiatiti. It was later remixed for the six-season American television show adapted from the film in 2019. There is little doubt that members of the young generation, when they hear the words "stay dead," understand it very differently from their forbearers.

Most voters under fifty have grown up with video games, the plots of which build upon the assumption that one has multiple lives, and that death is not a permanent condition. You can die and be reborn, either within the framework of a single game or by starting a new session. In a video game market that has tremendously expanded and become amazingly diverse, an entire segment (so-called FPS–TPS games) is dedicated to war games or zombie survival games, or a hybrid of the two.[16] A single player, usually featured as a human being with visible attributes of virility, massive musculature, and multiple defenses, faces enemies who stand before him as a compact mass of thousands, if not tens of thousands of individuals. The subject learns to kill (one may actually speak of overkilling here) regardless of the asymmetry between foes and friend (the lonesome gamer). The most successful game players thus develop heroic visions of themselves, while exposing the players to high levels of visual and emotional elation and violence.[17] Similarly, gamers (as well as the people who use social media platforms and social networks) may freely assume, name, edit, erase, revive, and circulate multiple identities and selves.

In a nutshell, the Internet, video games, and social networks have created the possibility for users to become greater, more potent and ever changing versions of themselves (plural). No particular physical effort is needed; no practical knowledge, either. Virtual things and people obey at a glance. This, in a situation where the boundaries between virtual and physical landscape, computer-based and physical realities, are increasingly blurred.[18] Yet while they are

[16] For a sample of such games, see: https://plarium.com/fr/blog/best-war-games/

[17] Of course, additional narrative features may be added: the environment is mostly hostile; partners are useful only to the extent that they take part in a common deadly combat against enemies; survival has to be achieved at all costs, etc. For a neurological approach to the impact of exposure to violence on empathy among gamers, see Carlo Lai, Gaia Romana Pellicano, and Daniela Altavilla, *et al.* "Violence in Video Game Produces a Lower Activation of Limbic and Temporal Areas in Response to Social Inclusion Images," *Cognitive Affective & Behavioral Neuroscience*, vol. 19 (2019): 898–909, at: https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-018-00683-y. Fewer are those scholars, especially in the social sciences, who seem to have investigated the impact of video games on ways of understanding politics. One (early) exception is John Crowley, "L'imaginaire politique des jeux vidéo," *Critique internationale*, no. 38/1 (2008): 73–90.

[18] On some of the legal consequences of this blurring of boundaries between the virtual and the real worlds, see Kevin W. Saunders, "A Disconnect between Law and Neuroscience: Modern Brain Science, Media Influences, and Juvenile Justice," *Utah Law Review*, 695 (2005), at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Kevin-Saunders-

thus promised all-powerfulness, an ever greater section of Europeans are experiencing a reduction of self (singular) in the "actual" world. Employees have low salaries, they risk being dismissed at any time, and they have the impression that their (often unique) skills and experience are not recognized and not valued. In a word, they are dispensable. In a number of professions, the expeditious development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has accelerated this pattern. Yet even long before the development of AI, the externalization of large segments of industrial activities to countries where salaries and working conditions were much lower than those in the North Atlantic world had done away with a broad range of blue collar and middle class professions. Today, entire professions are about to disappear, whereas new jobs will be created that hardly fit the skills of people in their fifties, or even those of young professionals who may feel they are already obsolete. The advent of consumer society, in which nearly every segment of life is commoditized, has created a dramatic situation for those who are economically excluded from the latest and most fashionable items: they are mere no-bodies, as if deprived of their very (capitalist-consumerist) bodily existence. They have become social "zombies."

Ultimately, we are witnessing a situation in which a (video) vision of human-kind has promoted expectations of every-growing and limitless power, whereas what many a citizen contemplates is a minimized and ever shrinking version of self. This tension between all-powerfulness and all-powerlessness is, I believe, one of the factors that aggravate the feelings of frustration, despair, and anger observed in contemporary European societies. It also impacts the ways in which people think about political communities and politics. This is all the more so as the conditions for the production and dissemination of knowledge and definitions of truth have in the meantime dramatically evolved.

3. Truth is trust: When one no longer knows what stands as fact

On November 24, 2024, most observers were dumbfounded by the results of the first round of the presidential elections in Romania: Călin Georgescu, a pro-Russian Far Right politician whose name had been unknown a few weeks earlier, won the first round of the vote with a comfortable lead over his main opponent, Elena Lasconi, a pro-European liberal (22.94% vs. 19.18% of the votes). In a matter of hours, there were rumors that the social media platform TikTok – a platform used by about 9 million people among the country's 19 million inhabitants

2/publication/228169290_A_Disconnect_Between_Law_and_Neuroscience_Modern_Brain_Science_Media_Influences_and_Juvenile_Justice/links/544a2da40cf244fe9ea635a2/A-Disconnect-Between-Law-and-Neuroscience-Modern-Brain-Science-Media-Influences-and-Juvenile-Justice.pdf

– had played a significant role in this outcome. Influencers with huge numbers of followers, coordinated account recommendation algorithms, and paid advertising were said to have distorted the electoral competition.[19] A few days later, the Romanian intelligence services released a series of declassified documents suggesting that TikTok had indeed been instrumentalized by a "state actor" as part of a massive influence campaign. All eyes looked to the Kremlin, where the foreign ministry spokeswoman denied allegations of external interference.[20] However, on December 6, the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the results of the first round of voting and asked the government to restart the entire electoral process, *de facto* cancelling the holding of the second round scheduled on December 8.[21] On the very same day, the European Commission announced it had sent TikTok a request for information on its policies during the elections.[22] Of late, computer analysts have been increasingly discussing issues of accuracy in online platforms, especially the impact of taking user engagement as a metric for virality: as a result of its ability to unleash strong emotions, the misinformation it allows to circulate might generate greater engagement and user interactions, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles. The fast spread of such emotionally charged contents, as well as the existence of networks of hostile troll farms and bots that aim to undermine social and political stability, limits the impact of mere fact-checking efforts.[23]

I believe that this example points to broader issues that affect both the epistemology of knowledge and the maintenance of democratic political communities. A few decades ago, most citizens worldwide believed that a certain number of facts could be established, and their accuracy proven beyond reasonable doubt, for two reasons at least: some institutions and individuals were endowed with the legitimacy to make scientific and intellectual claims; there also existed methods (including observations and experiments) and criteria that ensured the robustness of these statements. The dominant view of knowledge had undoubtedly evolved since the time when Karl Popper crafted the notion of falsifiability – that considerations external

[19] Martin Muno, "Did TikTok influence Romania's presidential election?" *Deutsche Welle.com*, 06.12.2024, at: https://www.dw.com/en/did-tiktok-influence-romanias-presidential-election/a-70954832

[20] AFP, "Russia Denies Unterfering in Romanian Elections," *The Moscow Times*, 06.12.2024, at: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/06/russia-denies-interfering-in-romanian-elections-a87245

[21] Dan Andreșescu and Maria Ilie, "Curtea Constituțională a anulat alegerile prezidențiale. Primul tur se va relua," *RFI.fr*, 06.12.2024, at: https://www.rfi.fr/ro/rom%C3%A2nia/20241206-curtea-constitu%C8%9Bional%C4%83-a-anulat-alegerile-preziden%C8%9Biale-primul-tur-se-va-relua

[22] Jorge Liboreiro, "EU Demands 'Urgent' Answers from TikTok about Possible Foreign Interference in Romanian Election," *Euronews.com*, 06.12.2024, at: https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/06/eu-demands-urgent-answers-from-tiktok-about-possible-foreign-interference-in-romanian-elec

[23] Aditi Pangotra, "The Algorithmic Echo Chamber: How Curated Content Fuels Misinformation," *Cyberpeace.org*, 09.12.2024, at: https://www.cyberpeace.org/resources/blogs/the-algorithmic-echo-chamber-how-curated-content-fuels-misinformation

to objects, observation, and theories needed to be taken into account in assessing how certain views gained scientific credence. This had been successfully argued by American philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn.[24] The definition of scientific truth also depended on the building of consensus across scientific communities. In other words, truth needed to be contextualized and historicized. In the social sciences, eminent scholars further argued that facts were socially constructed.[25] However, as French cultural historian Roger Chartier elegantly stated, even in the field of historical narrative, there were specific skills, practices, and operations of control that permitted societies to distinguish facts from fiction and to guide the production of a scientific discourse.[26]

In the past couple of decades, perhaps slightly more, at least two changes have radically transformed this configuration. The first one concerns the blossoming of expertise (and counter-expertises); the second one is what I summarize with the sentence, "truth is trust." For every single debate in today's world, whether related to environmental changes, historical events, or politics, one is faced with a multiplicity of claims that compete for recognition as scientific truth. To a casual layman and even to knowledgeable citizens, these rival assertions may seem equally convincing. Let us take the example of renewable energy. Is the shift from fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – to electricity from wind, solar, or hydro sources beneficial to humans and non-humans in terms of health and protection of ecosystems? The answer may seem obvious to us: "clean energy" rather than petroleum. Yet some scientists, especially in the field of medicine, argue that the increasing exposure of human beings to electro-magnetic frequencies (EMF) may adversely affect their health and favor the development of brain cancers, especially among young children whose blood-brain barrier is not yet fully formed.[27] Others insist that data on the health impact of EMF is still wanting, that experiences are inconclusive, and that the existing norms provide adequate protective mechanisms.[28]

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[24] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
[25] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966.
[26] Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language and Practices*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. See also the fascinating issue dedicated to Chartier's volume: "Forum: Critical Pragmatism, Language, and Cultural History: On Roger Chartier's "On the Edge of the Cliff"," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 21, no. 2 (1998): 213–361.
[27] Priyanka Bandara and David O. Carpenter, "Planetary Electromagnetic Pollution: It Is Time to Assess Its Impact," *The Lancet. Planetary Health*, vol. 2, no. 12 (2018): 512–514. https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2542-5196%2818%2930221-3
[28] This position has been adopted by a number of European governments.

A diversity of initiatives have coalesced to address these divisive claims, transform public discussions into arenas where more precise information can be generated,[29] and investigate the configurations in which early observations on the possible toxicity of certain elements (the cancerogenic silicate mineral asbestos, for instance) were dismissed for decades before they were acknowledged.[30] Among significant segments of the European public, however, the growing uncertainty regarding a diversity of risks for the living and the planet, as well as the publicization of cases of collusions between specific scientific networks and large corporations has encouraged distrust of public discourse on key issues, as well as attempts at seeking alternative sources of information, most notably on the Internet and on social media platforms.

This, in turn, has fostered a second evolution in the assessment of validity of claims, which can be summarized as follows: I hold as true that which my friends (offline and online) consider true. The development of social media has indeed generated digital communities and groups of followers who circulate contents they deem reliable because their friends do so – those people who are like you, who like you and with whom you may actually develop a form of online emotional attachment. Truth, therefore, is no longer based on internal and external criteria. Truth is based on trust. I trust you; therefore, the data you disseminate is valid.

Why is this evolution problematic for European democracies and for the very notion of public debate? Because in a public debate you may not know all the participants, you may not be emotionally entangled with them, and you are exposed to a wide range of contrasting views, some of which may be unknown to you before the start of the discussion. By contrast, if knowledge is based on "likes" and followers, with a range of options being dramatically narrowed down, how could a public debate take place? How could deliberative forms of democracy thrive?

Conclusion

This observation brings me back to the original question, that of cleavages and linkages in Europe. Throughout this talk, we have followed walls in their locations, relocations, and

[29] Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes and Yannick Barthe, *Agir dans un monde incertain. Essai sur la démocratie technique*. Paris: Seuil, 2001.
[30] Henry Emmanuel, *Amiante: un scandale improbable. Sociologie d'un problème public*. Rennes: Presse universitaires de Rennes, 2007.

dislocations. Most of their stays were short, three to four years at most, showing the limited ability of wall thinking to capture contemporary transformations. A number of us believe we are witnessing the end of a historical era. A new one might be in the offing. However, we cannot decipher the shape it will take – perhaps precisely because we remain staring at a wall and find no way of circumventing it.

Nevertheless, there might be an element of hope. In the title of this talk, I referred to the notion of elasticity. What I wished to suggest is that we can no longer do with linearity. We can no longer use binary categories, combining them with culturalist views and a pretense to think critically about our own positionality. When you stretch an elastic and release the tension, if it does not break, it sees the stored energy transformed into kinetic energy. That is, into movement. We, too, might be propelled into action. A few days ago, following the presidential elections in the United States, an American friend of mine wrote, "It is up to Europe now." I do not know whether Europe is ready for this kind of responsibility, but I would like to recall the famous – and no less remarkable – sentence by French writer and philosopher Albert Camus, who, at the end of the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, wrote: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Following his advice, we may wish to imagine ourselves as active pessimists. While we are looking for new ways of inhabiting our planet, we may wish to remember that we are both solitary and solidary.