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Book Review

A Philosophy for Europe – From the Outside

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A Philosophy for Europe – From the Outside

Roberto Esposito, translated from the Italian by Zakiya Hanafi, Cambridge: Polity Press and Medford: Polity Press, 2018, 270 p., £ 17,99 (paperback)

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In her Netflix special *Nanette*, Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby talks extensively about art history – specifically about Pablo Picasso, his rampant misogyny, and how he is still celebrated as the most important artist of the twentieth century, while critics are advised to “separate the man from the art”. Gadsby says this about Picasso’s contribution to art history:

“[Ironically], I believe Picasso was right. I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength. Difference is a teacher. Fear difference, you learn nothing. Picasso’s mistake was his arrogance. He assumed he could represent all of the perspectives.”¹

This thought summarizes neatly what Roberto Esposito’s *Philosophy for Europe* contributes to contemporary political philosophy – or what it might contribute, were it not for its author’s arrogance. The book is an impassioned call to recognize Europe’s strength precisely in its diversity, to see Europe as an *unitas multiplex* that is able draw solidarity from difference. In a political situation where nationalism and populism once again threaten to undermine peace and stability in Europe on a large scale, this call is certainly apt and important; and the political situation, we – as Europeans and philosophers, sociologists, or political scientists – find ourselves in should trigger reflection on who we are and what we want to be.

But Esposito’s own grandiosity gets in the way of conveying a clear vision that would go along with his impassioned call. At the end of the book, it remains unclear what his philosophy is and how it would help Europe, or even why we should accept it as a specifically *European* philosophy. I was left with the distinct impression that what he offers as political commentary – at the beginning and toward the end of the book – has little more complexity and provides little more insight than common explanations for the crisis of Europe bounced around in soundbites by the media; and what he offers as a philosophical and historical analysis has little to no bearing on the political questions facing Europe today. In what follows, I will focus less on these philosophical and historical aspects of Esposito’s book and more on its political implications.

A philosophy for Europe consists of five main parts plus an introduction. Esposito’s reflections on German Philosophy, French Theory, and Italian Thought (as he calls them, Parts II-IV) are framed by the formulation of his philosophy for Europe (Part V) and a

¹ Full transcript of *Nanette* by Hannah Gadsby on *Scraps from the Loft*, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2018/07/21/hannah-gadsby-nanette-transcript/>, accessed 04-06-2019.

formulation of the “crisis *dispositif*” (Part I), which sets the stage for the three “national” and continental philosophies Esposito discusses in detail. While Part I draws heavily on early twentieth-century philosophy (and earlier sources such as Nietzsche), Parts II-IV mainly consider theoretical developments after World War II and up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Part V reformulates the notion of “crisis” for our current situation. Esposito’s own declared goal is to analyze Europe from the outside – *da fuori*, the original Italian title of the book, published in 2016. He says this about historical predecessors to this idea: “Only by looking at themselves from the outside could the ‘good Europeans’ go beyond their own stereotypes, leaving behind the narrow-minded nationalism that led them to the brink of precipice.” (6) One might think that this announcement would imply an engagement with non-European philosophy, for instance, with post-colonial perspectives on Europe. But except for some reflections on the significance of German philosophers who were forced to emigrate to America (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), French philosophers who were invited to teach there (Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida), and some remarks about Europe as the “promontory of Asia”, Esposito does not take a single look beyond the borders of Europe, philosophically or politically. He engages exclusively with European sources, and world-wide crises such as large-scale refugees movements or terrorist violence are only of interest to him insofar as they have caused considerable concern and political upheaval in Europe.

What is more, within Europe, Esposito completely ignores British philosophy (which might be explained given his intention to focus on “continental” philosophy), Spain, and the entirety of Northern and Eastern Europe (with the exception of Jan Patočka). His historico-philosophical argument, such as it is, unfolds in a kind of synthesis (*Aufhebung*) between Germany, France, and Italy. In this trinity, the Germans signify the negative, the rational, and the attempt to salvage the ruins of Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) and modernity from its catastrophic collapse unto itself in the twentieth century. The French represent the postmodern, the neutral and apolitical, and skepticism toward all grand narratives – including a grand narrative of Europe. And the Italians stand for their particular take on biopolitics, an affirmative spirit born from political action, and their agonistic character of political and philosophical analysis. The agonism he finds in “Italian Thought” is also Esposito’s solution (hinted at more than formulated) for Europe’s crisis. He hopes that the Italians will inspire a “real political dialectic” (223) that will lead to the formation of a European people (*popolo*), complete with a return to Roman Law traditions on a continental scale (Esposito either does not recognize or does not care that most existing legal traditions in Europe are heavily inspired by Roman Law).

The theoretical choices and juxtapositions that structure this argument range from the strange and nonsensical to the downright insulting. Heidegger and Schmitt are quoted

often and affirmatively, and yet their association with Nazi Germany is glossed over. In the case of Schmitt, Esposito denies that his concept of *Großraum* (territory inhabited by culturally and linguistically connected peoples) and the Nazi concept of *Lebensraum* (used to justify the war of aggression and annihilation in Eastern Europe) had anything to do with each other; he also claims that Schmitt “did not hesitate to distance himself [from Nazism]” (45), but neglects to mention that this happened only *after* Nazi Germany had been defeated and Schmitt had to navigate a new political reality. Schmitt’s “political theology” (which should be called an anti-theology) is juxtaposed with Walter Benjamin’s politico-theological thought (188). This is absurd, because unlike Schmitt, Benjamin took the theological roots of modern political philosophy as a positive source and it is insulting, because it suggests a more or less direct theoretical avenue from a victim of the Nazis to a collaborator who welcomed the violence inflicted in the name of the “people”.

In contrast to Esposito’s admiration of Heidegger and Schmitt (actual Nazis, whose theories inspired and continue to inspire Nazi ideology), Habermas – his prime representative of post-war German Philosophy – is accused of formulating a theory of communicative and political action by whose light, “having received the almost unanimous assent of the Germans, Hitler would have been right!” (100) There are good reasons to treat Habermas’ universalism and steadfast belief in the power of dialogue with philosophical suspicion, but this misconstrual of his theory is both morally and intellectually disgraceful.

The political analysis that Esposito draws from his theoretical discussion does not fare much better. First of all, it is not clear what kind of relationship between philosophy, crisis, and political action he envisages. When he considers the philosophical landscape of the 1920s, he mocks philosophers who believe that their intellectual crisis had caused the political crisis (21). Yet exactly how philosophy could do more than just pointing out the obvious – that we find ourselves in a crisis – is not explained; and whatever the intended reading may be, Esposito’s political analysis certainly does not match the complexity of his philosophical aspirations.

Regarding the world-wide refugee crisis, he rehashes the well-worn and misleading distinction between “genuine” refugees and economic migrants (222) and the equally well-worn notion that Europe should only take in those refugees who are willing to prove themselves useful to Europe (223) – as if the law in many European states did not prevent refugees from making themselves useful in the first place. Esposito repeatedly echoes the populist talking point that Europe needs strong borders and strong national identities in order to become a stronger political union – never reflecting on whether this alleged

causal link between immigration, decentered identity and political weakness withstands scrutiny. He also suggests a link between immigration and a “qualitative leap in terrorist activity” (219), which is not supported by evidence – nor is it made clear what this new quality consists in.

At several times throughout the book, Esposito calls the nation a “natural” entity and the state an “artificial” one (see, for instance, 204). This, too, echoes a populist talking point: that the nation should be the primary focus of all politics, and that the state, in order to be legitimate, must serve the nation. It also ignores the fact that nations are no less historically and politically contingent than states; like states, nations are human creations, often established at considerable cost and against considerable opposition. The notion that “the nation” is somehow more authentic and natural than states is a myth – debunked by historical research on the topic, but apparently and unfortunately still alive and well in some circles in political philosophy. Esposito takes this myth to argue for another well-worn anti-European cliché – namely that the European Union and its institutions lack democratic legitimacy.

As mentioned above, his preferred solution for this problem is the agonistic formation of a European people that resists and rejects the powers of European elites and an “ultranational network of global finance” (231; an anti-Semitic frame, just like the mention of “globalism”, 46). If we add Esposito’s repeated insistence that European colonialism is a regrettable, but no longer relevant part of European history, his insinuation that fascism was merely an “aberration” of nationalism (205), and his obvious antipathy toward international diplomacy and European jurisprudence, his analysis becomes nearly indistinguishable from the slogans of European nationalists and populists.

So it seems clear enough that Esposito does not appreciate European integration which continues further along the path of treaties and juridical framework, the path it has followed for over five decades. It is much less clear what his alternative vision of the formation of a European people would entail. Given the actual political developments since the publication of the book, especially the inception of an international network of far-right parties, there are good reasons to think that this it would be as rabidly nationalist and anti-European as its historical predecessors – despite the pretense that the far-right’s concern is the preservation of European values. But would Esposito actually welcome such a development? Probably not – but it is hard to say, since the vagueness and the superficiality of his political pronouncements makes it difficult to identify their substance. What I can say is that I was less disappointed by the content of his claims (so far as they had any substance) than I was by the carelessness with which he undermined his own theoretical aspirations. Whether one wants to engage with philosophical defenses of na-

tionalism or think about political communities that transcend the nation-state, there are much more rewarding sources than this book.

P.S. In her program, Hannah Gadsby also mockingly asks Picasso whether one of his many perspectives was a woman's. Except for a brief discussion of Hannah Arendt's political theory, there are exactly three other sentences in the book (which has over 230 pages of proper text) that consider women theorists; all three of these suggest that their contribution was merely derivative of men's philosophy.