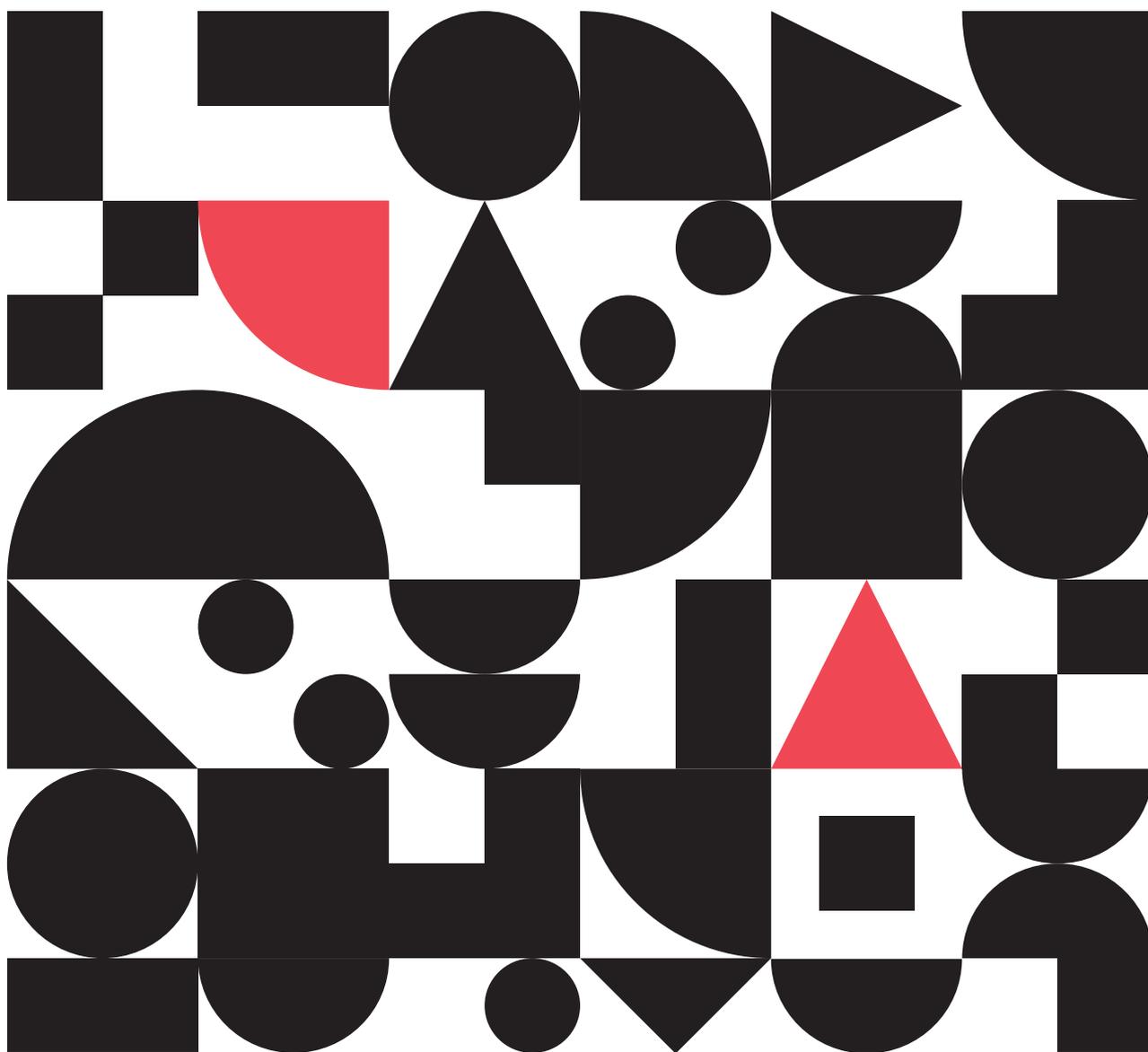


Europe's Geopolitical Awakening

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Europe's Geopolitical Awakening

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Introduction

In Jena, Hegel wrote in his journal, “Reading the morning newspaper is a sort of morning prayer.” What he meant was that it was a way of adopting a position in the world, not on the basis of divine certainties, but rather in terms of the world as it is. For the past ten or so years, a flood of events reported by the press has been forcing us to adjust our concepts and our mental map of the world.

President Putin unapologetically redraws maps and sends Russian poisoners and cyber soldiers to Western Europe. Erdoğan, his Turkish counterpart, scoffs at the edges of the Greco-European border, liberally deploying warships and blackmailing us with refugees. China's strongman, Xi Jinping, engages in a policy of divide and conquer through investments and vaccines, while in the United States – no less under Biden than under Trump – the narrative of a new Cold War spreads. Already in 2014, Donald Tusk, then President of the European Council, declared “History is back.” The events we have witnessed since then have only accelerated its return.

Faced with power politics both new and old, European leaders are searching for a response. In his speech at the Sorbonne, President Macron called for “European sovereignty”, Chancellor Angela Merkel believes that we “have to take our fate into our own hands”, while President Ursula von der Leyen wishes to lead a “geopolitical Commission” and the Union's head of Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, argues that it must learn the “language of power”. They all believe that Europe must become an “actor” in order to avoid being the “pawn” of superpowers.

Beyond these rhetorical injunctions, a geopolitical approach must be more radical: it requires a conceptual rupture. It requires our ethos, our mental world view to change. In order to become a geopolitical actor, Europe must leave behind the universalist and ahistoric thinking in which it found refuge after 1945 in regard to both values and economics. It must also accept the limitations of space and time and re-learn the language of power. In short, it must begin a true metamorphosis; one that will be painful yet liberating.

Power, Territory, Narrative

Let us attempt to outline a definition. What is meant by the concept of

geopolitics? Why would it be a more radical approach than often thought? I will consider three key concepts: power, territory, and narrative.

Geopolitics is above all a politics of power. Rather than relying on law or the market, its actors use power to achieve their objectives. In what forms, by which means, in what ways is this power expressed? It all depends on the situation. Power being relative, an actor improves his own position partly by weakening his adversaries or undermining a rival alliance.

The second key concept is territory. Geopolitics is more than power politics, since it encompasses geography. It is about the strategic advantages or vulnerabilities of a country in relation to oceans and continents, to rivers, mountains, or deserts. The approach therefore requires a spatial self-image, the will to define a territory, and to develop a strategic lay of the land in relation to other actors.

Thirdly, there is the narrative. While the prefix “geo” puts power politics face to face with a defined space, that space cannot be conceived without taking into account a feeling of unity among the people living within its boundaries. Whether it be a tenuous sense of shared experiences and interests or a true community united around values, norms, and customs, geopolitical actors are stronger when they speak on behalf of a collective whole. They therefore have an interest in maintaining, modeling, and perpetuating a collective memory, a story of “us”¹.

Of course, it is possible to use power, territory, and narrative in a number of different ways, but anyone who neglects one of the three concepts is playing a different game. Any serious geopolitical player displays a will to act, shows an awareness of space, and tells a narrative which links the past, present, and future of a given community. This is our point of departure.

The Pandemic is “Redrawing the Map”

If the pandemic is challenging our mental map of the world, it is important first of all to be aware that it has thwarted Brussels’ economic vision: the idea of open markets, with a competitive level playing field, where supply and demand intersect around the entire world. Hence the European Commission’s difficulty in understanding that export bans – which are taboo in times of peace – must be a part of our arsenal in times of crisis. It is a step which Ms. von der Leyen’s team ended up taking when it came to vaccines. In a pandemic, the laws of a war economy take precedent over those of the market economy.

In the medico-political maelstrom of spring 2020, the European public – relentlessly bombarded with media coverage – found four revealing yet disconcerting ideas coming to their attention.

One: In this catastrophe, Europe is neither the world’s lifeline, nor its Red Cross, but rather a pitiful victim.

Two: In the fight against the pandemic, the great American ally, who had been on the front line of every international crisis since 1945, was absent, even powerless.

Three: It was the far-off and elusive China, misunderstood or underestimated

1 — Cf. the essay published in 2020 by Vladimir Putin on the origins of the Second World War.

by most of us, that delivered tons of medical material.

Four: On top of all this, the European public learned as the situation was unfolding that the line between emergency aid and power politics is a fine one and that a benefactor can make demands.

These experiences disrupted Europe's geographic and historic consciousness. The pandemic has forced us to look at the People's Republic of China through a post-colonial lens and the United States through a post-Atlantic one. Europe must redefine its continental position and identities.

When it comes to China, the pandemic highlights three fundamental characteristics of that country as a strategic actor – three assets which deserve to be well understood.

First: Long-term thinking. Chinese political culture, with its great civilization and large population, thinks in terms of eras, decades, and centuries rather than years and electoral cycles. 2049 is never out of Xi Jinping's sight, as the centenary of the Communist Revolution and the year by which the country anticipates being a leading economic, technological, and scientific power.

Second: Centralism. This allows Chinese leaders to send a single message to the public - not only within their own country, but also to the outside world. Xi is first and foremost the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, which is more powerful than the State.

Third: An integrated vision. In the Chinese decision-making process, political, economic, and security implications are always kept in mind simultaneously. In external affairs, the new Silk Road - just as the diplomacy by means of masks and vaccines - is at once a grand strategy and a network initiative, a combination of commercial and geopolitical thinking, tactical operations, and improvisation.

Essentially, China is "copying" America's strategy from the 20th century but applying and adapting it in and to the 21st. The Pax Sinica. After all, the United States, has visibly and explicitly linked and continues to link economy, security, and commerce, as well as cultural and geopolitical influence in a single Grand Strategy. Europe on the other hand fragments its choices into distinct policy areas in a sectoral approach divided among numerous actors, impeding adequate action as a geostrategic actor.

From the moment when a rival China shows itself to be a civilization and superpower, what narrative, what self-image and what power is Europe prepared to engage with it, to oppose it?

These China-related questions also bring the relationship between Europe and America into focus, even if long-standing ties make it difficult to define. The United States' poor handling of the Covid crisis – hard to forget that President Trump went so far as to recommend the ingestion of bleach to protect against the disease – and the clear lack of aid provided to its allies have left their mark. Of course, the newly inaugurated President Biden has been reaching out to us since the beginning of this year, but America's absence in such circumstances has undermined the country's claim of moral exceptionalism and global leadership. The resulting feeling of isolation among Europeans has disrupted our relationship to space and time just as much as our discovery of the Chinese giant.

Space and Time

It is useful to clarify the categories of space and of time.

Let us begin with space. In this area, we note two contrasting concepts, outlined by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. These concepts are space and place. A place, a locality, a haven, brings protection and stability, encourages belonging; like a house where people feel at home. A space, on the other hand, opens up to possibilities, to movement; it is a question of direction, speed, and time. Clearly, we need both – a space to fly to and a nest to land in. Initially, the European Union exclusively focused on open space, eliminating borders for goods, capital, workers, and travelers, creating opportunities; a boon for those who trade and move.

Of course, for the last ten or so years, financial and geopolitical crises have compelled the Union to assume a new role. From now on it also aims to protect and has thus become a place. Here the British referendum played an important role. It is impossible to dismiss the Leave victory simply as an English idiosyncrasy. The referendum result also illustrates public expectations and disappointments which can also be found on the continent. The message is that Europe works for mobile individuals – young graduates, the business world – but far less so for the “stay-at-homes” – those who move little, who are attached to their territory and dependent on their national welfare state². In other words, through the British referendum, Europe as “opportunity and continental space” lost out to Europe as a “threat to national place”.

For the Union, this shift from space alone to the articulation of space and place – from liberalization to protection – affects a number of public policy domains. When it comes to the international dimension, however, suffice to say that geopolitics only begins there, in this shift from a universal (or global) self-image to a specific geographical location.

Michel de Certeau’s distinction between place and space corresponds to Heidegger’s concepts of Ort and Raum which themselves reflect Aristotle’s distinction between topos and choros. Topos is the concrete place which gives meaning, whereas choros is a more abstract, though not empty, space. Homer defines choros as a place “free of the dead” and thus, one can say, without a trace of the past, of history. Here we find the same distinction between abstract space (choros) and concrete place (topos). In this sense, geopolitics calls for a “topological turn”.

The same is true for the temporal dimension! We must pivot from an abstract time to a concrete time. Two further Greek concepts can help us out here. On the one hand, time as chronos – abstract time, the time of a clock, which we find in words such as “chronometry” or “chronology”. On the other hand, time as kairos – the right moment, the one which gives meaning. Aristotle considered chronos as time which is serially ordered and kairos as the time of opportune occasion. Other concepts need to be confronted with the abstract time of chronos: aïon for example, or epoch, stage, or era.

Armed with these temporal concepts, let us now turn to our protagonist. It can

2 — According to the words of Koen Lenaerts, President of the European Court of Justice. See also: Luuk van Middelaar, *The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union*, Yale University Press 2013, chapter 8

be said that, in the same way that post-war Europe positioned itself outside of Geography until the external world presented itself at its Border, the continent also positioned itself outside of Time until the point at which Events accelerated. This is why, in addition to having to make a “topological turn” – from an abstract universal space to a concrete situated space – the European Union must also make an “historical turn” – from an abstract time to a time which is concrete and meaningful.

Following the etymological link that Hannah Arendt established between “inter-esse” (being between things) and “interest”³, we can say that our capacity for defining our interests (the starting point for any geopolitical approach) can begin only once we determine between what we find ourselves. And this, of course, in both dimensions: between which places, inside which borders on the one hand; between which past and which future on the other. In other words, as long as Europe denied, refused even, its inclusion in time and space, it was impossible for it to defend itself, to know itself, to live as a body politic. Everything remained abstract, hollow, far off. We touch on something fundamental here, which has been pointed out by all those who have seen in the European Community of the past (and even in the Union of today) an entity that is irresponsible, stateless, a phantom.

It must be said that European Studies hardly helped it to take root. Academic research entered into a timeless logic as suggested by the two key terms which designate its overall movement: “European construction” brings to mind a construction zone outside of History where, as everything remains to be done, everyone must contribute, whereas “European integration” evokes a quasi-chemical process culminating in total fusion.

Whenever a collective attempt is made to anchor this drifting whole to concrete space and time, we essentially end up with a strategic vacuum of platitudes, good will, and universalism. Therein lies all the invisible difficulty in our relations with the United States, relations that do not rely solely on democratic values (in themselves no longer as solidly shared as in the past), but also on geostrategic and economic interests which are increasingly diverging. The inability to define, or even to talk about, these interests is to remain at the mercy of the most powerful partner. It is a situation which is even more troublesome as, on both sides of the Atlantic, we no longer share the same topos, nor the same era.

The Post-Pax Americana

In Alarums and Excursions: Improvising politics on the European stage, I describe the experience of political vulnerability as a “Machiavellian moment”, a term borrowed from J.G.A. Pocock. In his eponymous work, this historian situates the emergence of modern political thinking – in Machiavelli and certain of his contemporaries – in acknowledgement of the finite nature of the polis, which was at once a political emancipation and theological liberation from an eschatology.

Of course, for the European Union, this moment is crystalizing following a perilous decade – from the storm of the euro crisis to Brexit or the migration crisis. Each time, the Union acted in order to avert any immediate danger. It was a

slow metamorphosis and it resulted in a gradual emergence of executive capacity. However, words would only follow after the election of Trump. Merkel's famous 2017 statement - "we have to take our fate into our own hands" - is a purely Machiavellian declaration in Pocock's sense.

There is no point in reiterating the extent to which four years of Trump presidency solidified this realization. What matters today is the result. In terms of narrative logic, Donald Trump broke the "narrative spell" of the transatlantic alliance which had endured for the past seventy years. If the pattern has not changed, it is difficult to believe once again, as we did in the past, that whatever the United States wants or does is necessarily good for us.

If we are living in a post-Pax Americana, we are also living in the post-End of History. This is obviously no scoop, but here too we are slow to translate the awareness into action. Xi Jinping's China disrupts Fukuyama's narrative, which has been in the making since 1945, which we have been telling since 1989, and to which we have continued to cling to despite Beijing's newfound self-confidence.

In the United States, this shift in realization occurred around 2016-2017, when Xi very openly made clear his technological and geopolitical ambitions (and since then, his climatic ones as well). For Washington, this amounted to a dethronement, a threat to the United States' preeminence in global politics. In Europe, there was also concern, but we lacked the psycho-political dimension. After all, were we not dethroned back in 1918?

From a European point of view, it is up to us to rename this new period in history. We do not find ourselves, as Joe Biden stated in Munich, back in a struggle between democracy and autocracy. It might make more sense to see ourselves as entering into "The Age of Encounter" – a turn of phrase borrowed from the groundbreaking work, The Strongmen, by Hans Kribbe. It is an age of encounters with other great powers, other civilizations, and which demands pluralistic thinking.

Tragic Choices to be Made

We have witnessed in the past few years Europe's geopolitical awakening, though mostly against its will and its habits. Harsh encounters with other actors - such as Russia in Ukraine, or Turkey on the southeastern border - have forced its hand. For most of the last century, through political denialism, Europe has sheltered itself from the History which it believed had reached its End. We now come to view this period rather as an interval, a peaceful interlude.

Essentially, such geopolitical aspirations require a strategic capacity to define priorities, supported by a will to manifest ourselves and act as Europe, not without claiming a given space. At certain points – during the 2015-2016 migration crisis for example – the European Union demonstrated this global strategic capacity, but only in an acute crisis when its very survival was in jeopardy. In an emergency situation, there is nothing dishonorable in improvising. However, as we know, to govern is to anticipate. When viewed this way, improvisation is the starting point of government. This is certainly preferable to inaction; however, it represents but the very first step on the path to serious geopolitical emancipation.

For all the institutional innovations and adjustments that we can imagine, it is ultimately a matter of giving oneself the ability to authoritatively make a political judgement. I would like to emphasize this expression. Europe is confronted

with painful choices. Safety and prosperity can no longer be taken for granted. Spatial and temporal limitations mean that not everything can be accomplished at the same time. The transition from *choros* to *topos* (in space) and from *chronos* to *kaïros* (in time) requires what Aristotle calls *phronesis*, the wisdom and capacity for judgement. This category of thought and action is distinct from *technè*, the “efficient action” of skill, whose root we find in words such as technology and technocracy. Whereas the decision-making machine in Brussels was conceived to establish a technical and regulatory consensus, it must now take on the dilemmas of our time and transition from skill to *phronesis*.

For the public, the painful political choices at hand are acceptable – the *sine qua non* condition in our democracies – only if they are a part of a credible tale of why, a narrative which situates current struggles and choices in a larger temporal framework, in the context of underlying and shared values.

Put another way: a more geopolitical Europe clearly requires a number of practical measures, investments, and diplomatic energy. But in order to escape the strategic grip that the United States holds us in – especially due to the power of the dollar and our proximity to Russia – we will need in parallel a narrative emancipation.

Narrative and Power

During a state visit to Athens in 2019, Xi Jinping gave his whole-hearted support to his Greek hosts for the return of the Parthenon’s frieze from the British. Seized by Lord Elgin in 1801, the Acropolis’ marble masterpiece is today housed at the British Museum. Fanning the flames of this dispute earned the Chinese president Greece’s sympathy. That is far from irrelevant, as the country is an essential bridgehead of the Silk Road. It also allowed China to position itself as the avenger of Western colonial crimes, a stance that has helped it to make a name for itself in Africa, Asia, and South America. Completing his charm offensive, in the daily newspaper *I Kathimerini*, Xi emphasized the two country’s similarities as “ancient civilizations,” using the catchphrase “You have Socrates, we have Confucius.”

For a Europe that has difficulty defining its role in the world, other actors hold up a mirror; it is they who offer us a narrative and invite us to enter it. In Washington, the narrative of a new Cold War is developing, with as much ardor under Joe Biden as under Donald Trump, in which European democracies can fight on the side of the Good. In comparison, Beijing’s approach to Europe offers a stark contrast: whereas Xi Jinping always speaks of the relationship with the United States as one between great powers, he emphasizes, in our case, the link between «great civilizations» (with a special place for Greece). As a third great power, Russia offers a third image reflected onto Europe. At a summit with the EU’s presidents shortly before relations deteriorated over Ukraine, Vladimir Putin emphasized a shared “Christian heritage”⁴. There are other signs that the Kremlin once again sees itself as «the third Rome» and heir to the Roman popes and Byzantine emperors.

Whether it is a matter of democracy, civilization, or religious heritage, actors and observers outside our continent take for granted that Europe as a whole has its own historical and cultural identity, offering the basis for a narrative.

What is still lacking, however, is the will or the ability of our countries to express this identity politically.

Narrative and power are inextricably linked. After all, narratives do not just revolve around what is true and what is wrong; they have their own creative and performative power. They can become true.

It is necessary to choose your protagonist well. To this end, unlike European civilization at large, the young European Union is not able to carry our story-line. At the beginning of this analysis, I argued that the Brussels doctrine had forgotten about, and even declared taboo, the three basic geopolitical concepts of power, territory, and narrative. Let us be clear about the narrative. It is not a matter of saying that no story was developed, but that the narrative that was retained focused on integration itself, on its great men (Monnet, Schuman, Spaak), on its setbacks and breakthroughs (the Empty Chair Crisis, the Single European Act), on its progression from treaty to treaty, enlargement to enlargement. The old past has taken on the appearance of a bogeyman, except for a few precursors (from Charlemagne to Erasmus or Victor Hugo)⁵. We read in brochures and educational materials in Brussels that Europe was “born” on May 9, 1950. This desire for a rupture in history is understandable, so soon after the world wars. Looking to the future, purified of its sins, Europe became a «project» and an expectation. At the same time, the role of spokesperson has been handed over to jurists, economists, experts, and ideologues. What a lack of imagination!

Once the protagonist is identified, the narrative needs to determine its place in space and time.

Put starkly, if America becomes a Pacific superpower, Europe’s destiny is to become a Eurasian power. Instead of being the eastern side of the Atlantic order, Europe will in the future occupy Eurasia’s western reaches, the largest land area on the planet at whose edge lies the Chinese economic giant.

We will therefore have to reorient ourselves, in the most literal sense of the word, turning ourselves once again towards the East. This is an enormous shift. Of course, on the abstract map (the *choros*) nothing – or almost nothing – has changed⁶. But look at how different our *topos* is, how new our place on the planet. Yet we have hardly begun to reflect on this matter. This is a great task for the years to come.

The same is true of the narrative relating to our place in time. It, too, must be adjusted. The temporal image of the Union has several weaknesses, notably this unrealistic bet on the future that has already been mentioned: The Union is not the gateway to the End of History. The rest of the world is not moving towards a multilateral order.

Analyses of the Return of History are sometimes like distressed lamentations. Yet geopolitics begins when a political body feels and decides. It is a Return to History. We enter into it, pursue our objectives (power), define our space (territory), and give voice to that which makes us a community (narrative).

5 — Cf. Mark Gilbert, « Narrating the Process : Questioning the Progressive Story of European Integration », *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2008, n° 3, p. 641–662

6 — This continental shift was accentuated by the departure of the British (2020), who in the past maintained Europe’s Atlantic links, with London as the gateway to Washington and New York

To neglect this, to refrain from acting, is to risk a *kairos* moment of humiliation, such as China experienced in 1860 when the Summer Palace was looted. Our countries too, which have all experienced at least one of these events in the past, have memories that we would like to avoid reliving. What is new, and what the public is increasingly aware of, is that major events are beginning to affect us as Europeans in a very concrete way, including as a European whole. Thanks to European integration, while we have for three generations been sharing the time of the clock, the time of *chronos*, it is now also the historical clock, that of our *kairos*, which is ringing ever louder and summoning us.

Conclusion

We have seen why geopolitics, which is too often reduced to the fundamental concepts of power and territory, is blind and rudderless without the third notion of “narrative”. Thanks to story-telling – this ancestral and powerful means which allows us to link the past, present, and future – we live in a time which has meaning.

In geopolitics, the most sophisticated discourse takes the form of a “grand strategy”, articulating the ends and the means of the State. To echo one of Marx’s well-known phrases, we can say that the grand strategy allows us to interpret the world better while also being a tool to transform it⁷. This task does not fall solely to academics or think tanks; it must also and above all be accomplished and embodied at the highest levels of politics.

The language of politics and power is wholly natural for a country such as France, but it can be entirely foreign to other public opinions and systems of governance. It must therefore be translated as much in a literal sense as in a figurative one. Fortunately, Europe can overcome this obstacle, as it is a continent of writers and translators. Without words and translation, it is impossible to build a public sphere in which stories can be told, transmitted, and heard. Hannah Arendt tells us that it is only thanks to this public space that we can assimilate the small stories we tell each other within a larger narrative – that of History. Otherwise, they would simply be lost to time.

Classic American history is at heart a morality play of right versus might. Russia’s is a cynical chronicle of might versus might. China’s is a well-arranged harmony. European history has given us a tragic awareness that politics very often is right versus right – peace versus justice, equality versus safety, liberty versus democracy. We Europeans do not play to win but to minimize losses⁸.

This is already a lot. Twenty-five centuries separate the construction of the Parthenon in Athens and the Roman Republic’s adoption of the Law of the Twelve Tables from our indetermined era. There is here for us – French, Dutch, Germans, Italians, and other Europeans – the material that will allow us to forge and carry a narrative, to progress with confidence, on our piece of Eurasian land, among our friends, our neighbors, and our rivals, in the great theater of History.

7 — Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*. Analogy borrowed from Sébastien Lumet, Elie Pérot and Clémence Pèlerin : <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/09/18/une-union-toujours-plus-geopolitique/>

8 — Cf. *Alarums & Excursions*, p. 90.