

Is Europe's soil changing beneath our feet?

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For Deborah

I will begin with a text which will seem unusual: Jean Bollack's translation from the beginning of Oedipus Rex when the priest is addressing Oedipus. This translation says:

“For our city, as you yourself can see,
is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head
above the depths of so much surging death.”¹

In re-reading this text I found that it resonated perhaps too well with the distressing situation we are witnessing, in this collection of wars we find ourselves dealing with, and which is reflected in Sophocles' play by the dreadful figure of the plague. Here, the priest is in the position of supplicant; but we know right away that very quickly the king, the master, the authority which the priest implores will soon become himself the supplicant, chased from the city of Thebes – blind, exiled, and begging for his bread.

In Péguy's outstanding text, “Les Suppliants parallèles”, this invocation is repeated by juxtaposing it with the complaint – the plea – the Russian people made to the Tzar after the horrible riots of 1905². Péguy showed that the supplicant is not in a position of weakness but, on the contrary, always the master of the one whom he pleads with and whose authority he undermines. It was true of the Tzar as well as Oedipus, who was carried away by the ordeal: “He had entered as a king. He left as a supplicant”, Péguy wrote. The difficulty is that we have no clear authority or body to implore in order to “raise [our] head above the depths of so much surging death”. We must turn to each other, with neither king nor Tzar to plead with. This is what I understand in today's theme, “*Following the Invasion of Ukraine, Europe in the Interregnum*”. There is no authority we can appeal to. We are waiting.

One's situation on a given soil is always linked to an *ordeal*; it is when there is an ordeal that one is *situated* somewhere. We often forget that the word ‘situation’

1 — This quote comes from the translation of Oedipus Rex done by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC. <https://www.slps.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?FileName=Sophocles-Oedipus.pdf&dataid=25126&moduleinstanceid=22453>.

2 — Charles Péguy Œuvres complètes en prose, volume 2, La Pléiade.

is related to a form of territorial rootedness because of an ordeal which we undergo, one that surprises and allows us to define differently where we are.

I will give a simple example: For those who were in Rouen in 2019 when the fire at Lubrizol's chemical plant took place, they felt – very suddenly – that they were situated differently in the city, either close to the toxic gasses or not. They anxiously monitored the spread of the gasses to know “where they were”. They believed they lived in a city and found themselves transported somewhere else – right in the middle of a high-risk industrial zone. For several weeks, the people of Rouen lived on soil defined in part by the ordeal of this fire. This is very easy to understand.

Today, Indians and Pakistanis, who are dealing with temperatures of nearly 50°C, are tragically situated on soil that they risk having to abandon because of temperatures which are unsurvivable for the human bodies that we are – or at least the bodies of the poor. What happened when tanks marked with the letter ‘Z’ invaded the Ukrainian border, and what we Europeans came to understand, behind the frontlines, is a *situational ordeal*, an ordeal which defines in different ways the place we find ourselves and what people we form with those who worry and suffer around us. Suddenly, we were no longer in the same space, and this is the rule for any situation as the beginning of Oedipus Rex expresses so well. The place where we are and the people that we form are never an abstraction, they are always the result of a shock. Therefore, my argument is simple enough to understand: because of the ordeal imposed on us by the multiple conflicts we are currently experiencing and which is striking the Ukrainians with full force, on what soil do Europeans now stand? Can the present accumulation of crises allow Europe to finally find the soil that suits this great institutional invention and which continues to be presented as being suspended outside of any soil and with no people which belong to it?

I will consider this question from two slightly different points of view, as I am neither a specialist in geopolitics nor in military affairs.

The first difference is that I am interested in Europe not only as an institution, but also as Europe as a territory, as a soil, as a turf, as a land, or, to borrow the German expression, as *Heimat*, with all the difficulties of that term. In other words, when it comes to France, for example, I am always surprised that we easily distinguish between criticizing the government – God knows that we don't deny ourselves this! – without this threatening the rather visceral attachment to France as a country. Anyone can criticize the government and nevertheless feel connected to and attached to something which is a space, a territory, a history, a *situation* that defines for him or her what it is to be French. I am always surprised that this is not the case for Europe. Unfortunately, when we talk about Europe, we only think of Brussels even though Europe is also a soil, a place of belonging, a multitude of connections due to wars, memory, the ordeals of exile and migration, of the various catastrophes that all Europeans have known. And so, I am always interested in this essential connection between these two aspects of the same situation. If I use the word “soil” it is because it allows me to expand upon the connotations that stem from a term sometimes used in rather reactionary literature – soil as in *identity* – to innumerable scientific works on soil as humus, geology, climate, ecosystem – soil as in *rematerialized* – and which, as you all know, is threatened terribly. Thus the question: on what soil can Europeans land?

The second difference, which will not be a surprise, is that I find it necessary to closely link the territorial war being waged by the Russians in Ukraine and this other, *equally territorial* war being waged by the climate crisis in its broadest sense, for this is also a territorial war. Right now, in Pakistan as well as India, this temperature of 50°C is linked to an invasion by Europeans, particularly anglophones, who have for two centuries have changed the planet's temperature; this amounts to an invasion of the Indian territory just as surely as in the period of colonial conquests and the creation of the Raj. In other words, we are not dealing with a territorial war in the "classical" sense and with additional "environmental concerns", as we still so strangely say, but rather with *two conflicts* which are both territorial conflicts over the occupation of soils by other States as well as the violence exercised by States on other territories. If it is correct to characterize the conflict in Ukraine as a colonial war, then this is even more so the case with climate wars.

And yet, in both cases, the word "war" does not at all have the same connotation. From the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the extraordinary contrast between the speed with which we were able to mobilize energy, emotions, and knowledge to respond to the request for support in a way that stunned the Russians is striking. Sadly, we Europeans have long had the appropriate repertoire of action when it comes to wars! The "great continent" has clearly been created, fashioned, and stitched together by territorial wars. However, when it comes to the matter of ecology, to the great despair of those who work on the climate, our attitudes seem more like immobilization – and an embarrassment – rather than a mobilization. As quick as we are to align emotions that reflect territorial war *number one* and are able to instantly create an extraordinary welcome for Ukrainian exiles, send weapons, and impose sanctions, we are still left hanging, uncertain, paralyzed, and skeptical in practice, if not in thought, about the other, *territorial conflict number two*.

One exception is a point made by Naomi Klein in a fascinating article for The Intercept, which was translated and published by AOC magazine. Pierre Charbonnier in a powerful contribution to Le Grand Continent on the «ecology of war», also clearly emphasized the same point: Russian oil and gas have suddenly become both a strategic weapon and a major issue for the ecological transition.³ Here, at least, the two territorial conflicts converge, because everyone finds it scandalous to pay billions of euros to the Russians to attack the Ukrainians, whom we claim to support. Suddenly, this issue that was ultimately associated with conflict number two with its usual inability to act – «how to change our carbon-based energy sources» – is tied to territorial conflict number one and has become a strategic military issue. At once we observed a profusion of initiatives to associate the issue of Russian energy, gas, and oil with emotions, attitudes, and administrative decisions that combine the typical energy of territorial conflict number one with the fundamental questions raised by all environmentalists about territorial conflict number two. So much so that suddenly the question of border demarcation has become at once how to avoid

3 — Naomi Klein, « Guerre et climat, le péril de la nostalgie toxique », AOC, 14 mars 2022 ; Pierre Charbonnier « La naissance de l'écologie de guerre », le Grand Continent, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2022/03/18/la-naissance-de-lecologie-de-guerre/>.

invasion by tanks marked with the letter Z and, what is new and unexpected, how to wean ourselves off of Russian gas and oil as quickly as possible.

This would still allow, in principle, as Charbonnier's article clearly shows, to imagine sacrifices in the name of conflict number one in order to support Ukraine. This is a sacrifice that has so far been impossible to achieve in the name of territorial conflict number two, meaning the one that concerns what I call the New Climate Regime.⁴ Nothing is certain, of course. The Guardian has published terrible predictions about what they call «carbon bombs» – those rights to explore new sources of oil, rights granted by states that are still a part of the Paris Agreement – the sheer number of which is enough to negate any efforts to control the climate.⁵ The American slogan «Drill, baby, drill!» is spreading like wildfire. In France, to take an unfortunate but well-known example, the FNSEA is chomping at the bit to get rid of all environmental rules on account of the war in Ukraine. But there is nevertheless an incredible opportunity to be seized, which is redefining the territorial situation in the dual form of border defense and energy autonomy.

This was obviously the plan of many ecologists, but it certainly has not coincided with the decisions that have been made regarding globalization over the past 50 years, which, through the «gentle bonds of trade», would tie us to both Russia and freedom. Consequently, there is a historical moment, or, as it is called, a *kairos*, an opportunity to be seized that awaits its heads of state, a situation of generalized war that would give Europe a soil loaded with the energy question that has become doubly strategic, both militarily and ecologically, in a way that it was not before the war in Ukraine. Hence the term «ecology of war».

It is obvious, however, that we have to handle this term «war» with care, since it is not used by any of the conflict's parties in the same way. Russian citizens are not allowed to use this word and they can go to jail if they do not use the alternative of «special operations». The word «war» is regarded as spreading fake news – *fejk nius* in Russian-English. The situation is all the more curious since the Russians are not even allowed to question the history of the Great Patriotic War, as shown in a fascinating article by Florent Georgesco.⁶ Even the dates are written into the Constitution and cannot be changed under penalty of prison. Their World War began in 1941 and not in 1940, or worse in 1939, the year of the German-Soviet pact. It is significant to note that the Russians, though they do not have the right to pronounce the word «war» regarding Ukraine, have the right – as I learned from a colleague of the University of St. Petersburg – to use it to talk about the war that *Westerners* are, according to them, waging against Russia! The irony must be acknowledged: if the West does not use the word war with Russia, it is in order to avoid being at war with it...

4 — Latour, Bruno. *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le Nouveau Régime Climatique*. Paris: La découverte, 2015.

5 — Damian Carrington & Matthew Taylor "Revealed: the 'carbon bombs' set to trigger catastrophic climate breakdown" Guardian, 11th may 2022.

6 — Florent Georgesco, *Le mythe russe de la grande guerre patriotique et ses manipulations*, Le Monde, 29-05-22.

All the military authorities, especially NATO, are making every effort *to not use* this taboo word in their relations with Russia, this time in order not to give it a pretext for engaging in a nuclear conflict. This would not result in a «war», despite all the efforts to tame its use, but in mutual annihilation hidden behind the rather innocent term of strategy.

Consequently, this is a very asymmetrical conflict, since the only ones who have the right and the will to use the word war are the unfortunate Ukrainians who find themselves facing an enemy who claims that this is not a war but « a simple police operation », and who have behind them States that claim that « this is a war *for you* Ukrainians, but certainly not *for us* Westerners »! We are therefore dealing with a very uneasy situation with nuclear threat looming on the horizon, which obviously cancels out any notion of conflict. Without being a disciple of Carl Schmitt, we can still ask ourselves how a people can situate itself in history if it is forbidden to recognize the existential threat to the values it holds dear in the conflict it is carrying out. A police operation is not conducted against enemies, but against criminals. One cannot make peace with criminals, though perhaps with enemies.

This impossibility of naming territorial conflicts number one is found in territorial conflict number two, because we do not know how to name the controversies that are, for reasons of modesty, called ecological, and which are in fact conflicts of territorial invasion by another power. Here, if the word war is forbidden, it is because if we were to utter it, we would have to take measures which would obviously force us to recognize real enemies within the borders of our «allies» as well as at home. In order to convince ourselves of this, we only have to identify those we would have to learn to fight if we were serious about getting rid of Putin's gas and oil. Perhaps they reside on our street, fill the tank of our car, or increase our stock portfolio... Conflicts would draw terribly close, and we would then be in the same situation as Oedipus who realizes, little by little, that he who is outraged by the crime is the one who committed it – and who continues to commit it...

In these areas, the word war is taboo because it hits too close to home. If we speak of «world change» or «interregnum» regarding the war in Ukraine, it is because of the convergence between these two types of territorial or colonial conflicts. As scandalous as it may be, the war in Ukraine alone would not be enough to give us this impression of radical change. It is because we feel that the territorial conflicts that began long ago with extractivism are finally resounding violently with the most classical forms of war and exchanging their properties in a terrifying way. Sophocles chose the figure of the plague; today we recognize it more clearly in that other curse – gas and oil.

The uncertainty about the word «war» is compounded by an uncertainty about the word «peace». As many commentators have pointed out, if Europeans feel that peace has been broken, it is because they have been living in a bubble away from the countless conflicts that others have been waging on their behalf. We have lived «in peace» but only if we forget about the United States' atomic umbrella, the globalization of trade, and extractivism's ruthless battle over natural resources. We were therefore in a kind of suspended or simply deferred peace which we have now emerged from, which is not necessarily a bad thing. In a text published in *New Statesman* and analyzed by Adam Tooze, Jürgen Habermas clearly demonstrates that each country – Germany, France,

England, and of course Ukraine – has its own trajectory of this relationship between peace and war which makes it impossible to rush to unify them all in a single schema.⁷ What is true of States is also true of individuals; it would be strange for people of my generation who have gone from the atomic threat to climatic devastation to speak as if «peace» had suddenly come to an end in February 2022, when they have never really known it. Being a child of the baby boom, I spent my life feeling the threat of nuclear holocaust and without any transition, I have moved on to the threat of ecological collapse. I will therefore not analyze the arrival of war in Ukraine as a breakdown of peace, but as the realization by Europeans of the now unbreakable link between the two types of conflict in which they are now engaged.

The question I would like to ask, then, is this: what do these struggles on both sides – territorial and colonial conflict number one and territorial and colonial conflict number two – add to the classical definitions of European existence? And always with this third conflict of nuclear annihilation hanging over our heads. The earth virtually devastated by nuclear power, the earth actually devastated by ecological change, and the Ukrainian territory devastated by the blood Red Army. This is where we risk being « badly shaken » and unable to “raise [our] head above the depths of so much surging death ». In this interregnum, what can we hold on to?

In the last part of these remarks I will refer to what will seem a rather unusual document: the famous Renan conference entitled “What is a Nation?” presented in this very room in 1882.⁸⁹ You will say that this is completely outdated, that we no longer use such reasoning in such serious moments. However, I must confess that I found myself quite intrigued during this recent presidential campaign by the emergence of the expression “ecological nation”. This is perhaps only an invented communications term, but I wondered about the significance of juxtaposing the old idea of «nation» with the adjective «ecological». Is this not a profound idea that would make it possible to give meaning to the expression of a «European ecological nation»?

To define the French nation, Renan challenges racial, geographic, and religious determinism. After eliminating all the other definitions, he ends his famous lecture with the conditions that make the French nation and writes, “No, geography makes a nation no more than race does. Geography provides the *substratum*, the field of battle and of work but man provides the soul”. Clearly no politician today will talk about the soul, but this idea was typical of the 19th and 20th centuries: the land and nature provide the passive setting where human history unfolds, which is the only thing that really matters. At that time, the earth was merely the stage, the substrate of history. Renan continued, “Man is *everything* in the formation of this sacred thing that one calls a people. *Nothing*

7 — Adam Tooze *After the Zeitenwende: Jürgen Habermas and Germany's new identity crisis*, New Statesman, 12th May 2022.

8 — Ernest Renan « *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation* », conférence faite en Sorbonne le 11 mars 1882, Paris Calmann-Lévy. Disponible sur Wikisource.

9 — Translator's note: All English citations from Renan's text come from the translation by Ethan Rundell, Paris, Presses-Pocket, 1992.

material suffices. A nation is a spiritual principle resulting from the profound complexities of history – it is a spiritual family, not a group determined by *the lay of the land*” (my emphasis). It is this well-known phrase that reveals an enormous distance from the present situation.

Today, it is instead the «lay of the land», or to use the language of scientists, the incredible rapidity of the earth system’s reactions to human actions that take part in the “profound complexities of history”. What amazes us now is not the stability of earth’s substrate but, on the contrary, that it acts like any other actor and with a tempo, rhythm, and power that Renan could not foresee. In speaking of the soul of a people deciding to live together, he could not have anticipated the *dynamics* of a soil gripped by industrial history. This does not necessarily mean that his idea is outdated, but that it needs to be profoundly modified to take the current situation into account. A nation is certainly not defined by geography, but it can *define itself* according to the type of land it has decided to inhabit. This is why I use the word «soil» because its connotations are not necessarily those often associated with the extreme right, with the notion of defending soil, or to keep with the style of the time, with the Barrésian version of «the earth and the dead». The soil, for those interested in earth sciences, is a crowded, occupied, populated soil whose resources and components are attacked or destroyed one after the other, whether it be water, humus, insects, the atmosphere or viruses.¹⁰ In other words, soil has two very different definitions. There is the one that Renan rightly rejects of geographical or identity-based determinism, but there is another meaning that seems much more interesting to me, namely the soil burdened by ecological transformation, by this rematerialization, the most striking example of which is the link between Russian gas and oil and military and ecological strategy.

But the soil is also repopulated in another sense. When Renan defined the nation as a collective « of those who have suffered together », he was not thinking of all those whom a people *causes to suffer*. To make a territory green is to modify its borders, since it makes immediately visible all the connections that allow Europe to ensure prosperity, abundance, and freedom.¹¹ As we are learning from the proliferation of decolonial studies, what environmental historians used to call « phantom hectares » to designate the extension of a European country that delegates to the outside world and to other peoples the extraction of resources essential to its prosperity, is no longer phantom. These are now perfectly concrete territories that require modifying the very borders of Europe.¹² The world *in which* we live and the world off which we live yearn to overlap. In other words, the territorial question is not simply raised because the soil is populated by all the beings that now participate in our understanding of a habitable planet, but also because Europe finally understands that

10 — Latour, Bruno, and Peter Weibel (sous la direction de) *Critical Zones - The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2020.

11 — Charbonnier, Pierre. *Abondance et liberté. Une histoire environnementale des idées politiques*. Paris: La Découverte, 2020.

12 — Ferdinand, Malcolm, (sous la direction de) *Ecologies politiques depuis les outre-mer*. Lormont: Bord de l'eau, 2021.

it can only survive and define itself through the peoples from which it lives. Like Péguy's supplicants, they are the ones who undermine all authorities and deepen the interregnum.

In Renan's version of the nation, it is a voluntary decision to live together after shared catastrophes, what he calls « the profound complexities of history ». You will therefore understand my question: *can Europe form a nation by deciding to depend on the material conditions that it pretended to ignore during the period of false peace in which it believed itself to be?* That a “self-determined” collective does not mean that it undergoes a geographical determinism, but that it finally becomes capable of determining the place, the location, the country, the soil, the geography, and the territory in which it finds itself because of the sudden appearance of the many territorial conflicts and peoples it claims to get along with in order to live.

This is my hypothesis – and I readily admit that it is a simple hypothesis: just as the territorial war *adds* Ukraine to Europe in all possible forms, including perhaps one day in the form of joining the Union, so too does the war within the new climatic regime add the sources, the places, the situations, and the countries of extraction that allow the definition of its borders to be redefined as well as the composition of the nation that it decides to form. In other words, it is a matter of combining the superb but perhaps somewhat dated argument of Renan concerning the soul and the « spiritual » dimension of the nation with the redefinition of territory made concrete by ecological changes.

In closing, I would like to come back to the term « interregnum », which signifies a transition or suspension between two different forms of authority. I think we should be somewhat wary of using the term « free world » to characterize the current conflict as viewed from the « Western » side, particularly the United States. If the term « free world » is problematic, and even more so for Europe as a power, it is because they refer to the previous regime, which is now said to be at an end. Indeed, at that time, the expression represented the project of planetary modernization that was supposed to bring all other countries along with it. But what the dual ecological and military crisis actually represents is the end or the suspension of this modernization project, which is in total contradiction to the New Climate Regime. Resurrecting this concept, which dates from the post-war period, is surely stepping outside of history and into the wrong era, since it belongs to the new interwar period, which has now come to an end. Furthermore, it is quite striking to note that with regard to supporting Ukraine, the « free world » only includes the former colonial powers, which have not managed to get the most populous nations on their side. This is the most striking symbol of the interregnum. No power has emerged that can replace the old one. As in the play by Sophocles which I chose to introduce these reflections, faced with mounting pleas, all powers shudder at discovering that they are the authors of the crimes they seek to punish.

This is why it is important to find a more inclusive term than « free world » and especially one that is less contradictory or hypocritical. We need a term, an invocation rather, that designates the state of dependence rather than emancipation and the plan to repair conditions of habitability that have been devastated. But it would then be necessary to be able to define the new sovereign, the new sovereignty, that would put an end to this interregnum. In the absence of such a term, I will conclude with a phrase that will speak directly to our friends at Le Grand Continent, whom I thank for inviting me. In this remarkable text, Renan wrote, « Nations are not eternal. They have a beginning, and they will have an end. A European confederation will probably replace them. *But, if so,*

such is not the law of the century in which we live » (my emphasis). In this presentation, I claim that the law of the century in which we live is the moment when Europe, on the contrary, not Europe conceived only as a Union, but Europe as a soil, finally finds its people and the people finally finds its soil. This is precisely because Europe feels much more acutely than other nations the extent to which it is living in an interregnum and is looking for «the law of the century», which is not, in fact, the law of the two previous centuries. Europe can finally undertake the task, in the midst of perils and because of them, of voluntarily forming a nation.