Phenomenology and the Idea of Europe: Introductory Remarks

In the 1935 lecture that he gave in Vienna, Edmund Husserl stated that European nations are sick, and that Europe itself is experiencing profound crisis.¹ This diagnosis is all but surprising. Already in 1882 Nietzsche referred to European man as a ‘sick, sickly, maimed animal’, who choose to garb himself in morality in order to disguise his mediocrity and weakness.² Similarly, especially during the interwar period, many insights into the decadence of Europe and of European humanity emerged, describing the twentieth century as the scene of Europe’s ultimate fall.³

Compared to these interpretations, Husserl and his phenomenological school took a different stance, addressing European crisis not as an irremediable destiny, but as a particular historical condition, which was caused by determined circumstances and which could be potentially surmounted through a specific form of philosophical practice.

Reading Husserl’s *Crisis of European Sciences* today gives us a sense of his big effort in facing the crisis of the human capability for relearning or returning to rationality, in order to know and actively interact with the surrounding world. By relearning how to authentically reflect on European history and culture a path out of the critical situation that Europe was going through during the first decades of twentieth century could eventually be found. As James Dodd pointed out in his analysis of Husserl’s *Crisis*, what makes human ‘reflection’ authentic is its capacity of being not just a reflection on, but also a critique of what it addresses.⁴ In this sense, a phenomenological reflection on Europe does not simply mean certifying an established fact, but engaging in a critique of Europe, and of the way in which European humanity conceives the space in which it lives, which cannot be simply defined by geographical, cultural, or linguistic borders, but reveals more complex structure and functioning.

In defining his critique, Husserl clearly had in mind the situation of European culture, from the years that preceded the burst of the Great War, until its aftermath. The first side of this critique regards positivism, and the positivist reduction to which scientific knowledge has been subjected. ‘The exclusiveness with which the total world-view of modern man, in the second half of the nineteenth century, let itself be determined by the positive sciences and be blinded by the “prosperity” they produced, meant an indifferent turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity’.⁵ These questions, in the dark times during which Husserl conceived

¹ Husserl, ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man’, 150.
⁴ Dodd, *Crisis and Reflection*, 3.
⁵ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 5-6.
the *Crisis*, are life’s meaning, or complete lack of any meaning; the position of free, rational human beings in their surrounding world; and the capability of humanity to use its freedom in order to reshape this world, in view of a possible enhancement of its condition. The problem here is clearly not ascribable to the natural sciences, whose positive development is undeniable and whose outcomes can constitute an important tool in view of this enhancement, but to whomever thinks that these outcomes, rather than practical tools useful to orientate oneself in their lifeworld, constitutes the world itself, the totality of its aspects, as though a traveller confused a map with the territory it represents.⁶

The incapability of positivist knowledge to respond to some of the most shattering issues of human life is at the origin of all those tendencies towards mysticism and irrationalism that spread in the first decades of twentieth century, and against which Husserl addressed the second and stronger side of his critique. According to Husserl, this irrationalism, which is both philosophical and political, is nothing else that the ‘rationality of “lazy reason”’ which evades the struggle to clarify the ultimate data and the goals and directions which they alone can rationally and truthfully prescribe.⁷ What Husserl had in mind, in 1935, were Heidegger’s existential philosophy as well as those political ideologies, which in those years, were striving to found their actions on absolute and ambiguous values (nation, class, race), rather than on a rational insight into reality. Going back to the ultimate data (*Vorgegebenheiten*) that these lines of thought have essentially overlooked is precisely the task of phenomenology.

Imagining a form of human reason able to tackle Europe’s critical situation, while neither losing itself in abstract positivism nor falling into any simplistic explanation based on irrational premises, corresponds for Husserl to the fundamental philosophical task of founding a new ‘practical reason’. In this sense, it is of primary importance to acknowledge that phenomenology does not operate in this context only as a descriptive discipline, aimed at theoretically analysing Europe’s crisis. Besides this descriptive character, phenomenology is also asked to provide the means for shaping a philosophy in action and a rational science of society. This ethical and political character of phenomenology is already visible in Husserl’s writings from the early 1920s on the idea of ‘renewal’ (*Erneuerung*), understood as an absolute ethical demand.⁸ In order to foster this renewal, which he considers as a fundamental necessity in order to overcome the devastation of the First World War, Husserl aims at creating a ‘rational science of human being and human community, which could found a rationality in social, political action, and a rational political

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⁶ Husserl himself used in 1913 the metaphor of the map, in order to describe the correct approach of phenomenological research. See Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 232-33.
⁷ Husserl, *Crisis*, 16.
technique’. As Husserl himself acknowledged from the very beginning of his analysis, this task could easily appear utopian; considering how difficult is, even for a single individual, organising life according to reason (Vernunftleben), everything suggests that doing that with the life of a community, i.e. of a multitude of individuals, must be even harder. Nonetheless, in both cases, the simple struggling for obtaining this renewal, for tending toward this fundamental target, already has for Husserl an ethical meaning, even though this goal is not actually achieved, but maintains a teleological and regulative character. In this struggle, a fundamental role is played by human responsibility. An authentic philosophy of action is for Husserl first and foremost a philosophy which is aware of and responsible for its rational activity, whose target is necessarily something ‘temporally infinite and eternal in time’, that is ‘the future of humanity, the rise of true human kind’.

In this respect, Husserl’s analysis is not merely optimistic, as he recognises that human beings cannot avoid being disappointed and feeling profound dissatisfaction, whenever they confront their present and concrete condition with this infinite task. Nonetheless, the new philosophical practice that Husserl is here trying to delineate, in view of a renewal of humanity, aims precisely at grounding human action not simply a posteriori, on the basis of random historical contingencies (which can easily be dissatisfactory), but rather on the basis of a priori ‘evident rational weighing’. Only in this way can an authentic ‘ethical conscience’ (ethische Gewissen), which corresponds for Husserl to the ‘conscience of the responsibility of reason’, be actually created.

In this philosophical and ethical venture, whose final aim consists in completely renewing human social existence on the basis on moral, rational judgement, ‘Europe’ stands as a fundamental regulative ideal; a cultural horizon in which today’s humanity still sinks its roots, and from which it can mine sources in view of a possible renewal. For Husserl, European culture is not only the highest culture ever achieved in human history, but also ‘the first realisation of an absolute norm of development, which is called [berufen] to revolutionise every other self-developing culture’. This statement reveals a Eurocentric element in Husserl’s conception, which I think is undeniable. Nonetheless what should be underlined is that the revolutionary character of European culture, whose origin and most important development Husserl identifies respectively in ancient Greece and modern Enlightenment, is not seen here as a mere quality; a property which naturally belongs to Europe. This character is rather understood as a task and an existential vocation (Lebensberuf).

10 Ibid., 12.
11 Ibid., 32. On the link between philosophical life and life in responsibility, see also Husserl, ‘Meditation über die Idee eines individuelle und Gemeinschaftslebens in absoluter Selbstverantwortung (1924)’, in Erste Philosophie (1923/24). Zweiter Teil.
12 Husserl, Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937), 73.
which Europe and its inhabitants must attempt to realise. What Husserl has in mind, while writing these pages, is Europe’s condition in the aftermath of the First World War, that is, a wrecked continent on the verge of a long-lasting decline. In that particular context, recalling the value and power of European culture does not mean affirming its innate superiority, but rather indicating how this culture can be conceived as an ideal toward which historical Europe (the wrecked one) can move its steps, striving to find a possible path out its tragic condition.13

What we have just recalled is also the reason why Husserl’s phenomenology and his project of founding a ‘rational science of human community’ might be useful today, when Europe is facing a new economic and political crisis. For the same reason why Husserl’s European ideal could work as a fundamental telos, in view of the renewal of post-war Europe, conceiving today an updated European ideal, also at the risk of being accused of chasing ‘chimerical ends’,14 could be the only way for re-thinking the project of a European Community, beyond the hindrances that this project ran up against. To do this, following again Husserl’s example, the arguments of current ‘Realpolitik’, which tends to see unified Europe as a failed project, must be put into brackets. This does not entail overlooking the critical situation which Europe is currently undergoing. It simply means maintaining at the very centre of this analysis the rational and ethical telos which Husserl contributed to identify as fundamental bearings of Europe’s political agenda. This is precisely what the authors of the Manifesto of Ventotene did, when, during one of the most tragic moments of European history, they sketched some fundamental aspects of future federalist Europe.15 This is also what other phenomenology scholars tried to do, following Husserl’s path: Scheler’s axiology, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of institution, Patočka’s post-European perspective; these can all be read as attempts to harvest and reshape that same teleological idea of Europe, which Husserl has already envisaged.

The contributions to this Special Issue develop in different ways some ideas that have been only briefly sketched here, without any pretention of being exhaustive. In particular, two distinct directions can be easily distinguished. The first direction, which consists of four articles, entails detailed analyses of Husserl’s insight into Europe and European heritage, as well as interpretations of the same topic, in post-Husserlian phenomenology. Kenneth Knies focuses his attention on Husserl’s understanding of Europe and European history, by expounding three fundamental cornerstones of European identity: renaissance, denationalisation, and Europeanisation. By doing

13 On the importance of this aspect of Husserl’s understanding of Europe as a movement toward an ideal, rather than as a continent, see De Monticelli, ‘Sour Fruits on the Trail: Renewing Phenomenological Practice’.
14 Husserl, Außsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937), 4.
15 See Spinelli and Rossi, The Manifesto of Ventotene (1941), http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1997/10/13/316aa96c-e7ff-4b9e-b43a-958e96afbecc/publishable_en.pdf. A confrontation between Husserl’s idea of crisis, and the concept of crisis expounded in the first part of the Manifesto would be a good way to further develop this research between phenomenology and politics.
this, he sheds light on the complex nature of Europe, which according to him can be considered as a postulate of phenomenological reason. Darian Meacham tackles the problem of European history and politics, through a confrontation with the concept of institution (Stiftung), which plays a central role in Husserl’s Crisis writings. He offers a phenomenological interpretation and critique of Pierre Manent’s ‘euroskepticism’ by parsing it via the concept of institution. Francesco Tava focuses on Jan Patočka’s attempt to further develop Husserl’s reflection on Europe, by introducing the idea of ‘post-Europe’ as a new pivotal concept, which can serve for identifying a new, ethical perspective towards European past and possible future. Louis Blond’s article concludes this first part, by engaging in a critical analysis of Levinas’ concept of Europe and Eurocentrism, through a vivid confrontation with postcolonial studies. His conclusion is that postcolonial critique towards Levinas’ understanding of Europe is incomplete and needs to be further investigated in order to mine from it positive theoretical outcomes.

The second direction of this Issue, the last two articles, moves, so to speak, outside of phenomenology, in the sense that it consists of analyses of themes and authors that cannot be directly linked to phenomenology scholarship, and yet provide very meaningful material for any phenomenological reflection on Europe. Simon Glendinning dedicated his contribution to Nietzsche’s critical insight into Europe, and in particular into the process of integration and democratisation that has characterised modern European politics. Nietzsche’s ambiguous remarks on this topic, can act as an important counterweight to Husserl’s vision and phenomenological project. Rodolphe Gasché’s article concludes this Issue with an analysis of Plato’s Sophist and particularly of the figure of the ‘Stranger’, which is at the centre of this dialogue, and constitutes for Gasché the fundamental mark of European philosophy, understood as a philosophy of alterity.
Bibliography


