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2050: An African travels through Europe*

Abstract: The European Union, although presenting itself as institution acting only in the interest of progress, has many weaknesses. These are becoming clear in its continuously recurring crises (such as, at present, the extreme levels of debt of Greece, Ireland and Portugal which threaten the Euro). In this essay, a positive future scenario is developed in which European integration takes a new direction: It refrains from the aim of central planning by the ever-growing Eurocracy in Brussels, and moves toward a lean supranational coordination institution. In this way, it also opens many possibilities for direct participation of citizens and removes the Iron Curtain between Africa and Europe, thus becoming open for students, qualified workers and visitors from Africa and toward Africa, to the advantage of both continents.

Keywords: European integration, relations Europe – Africa, bureaucratization, direct democracy, socio-cultural exchange.

In his novel Season of Migration to the North¹ the native-born Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih (At-Tayyib Salih, 1928-2009) describes the experiences of the young man T. who went to Europe to go to University. There, he got

* This article has first been published in German („2050: Ein Afrikaner reist durch Europa,“ in: Attac, ed., Wir bauen Europa neu. Wer baut mit? St.Pölten/ Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, pp. 209-216). I am grateful for critical comments to this first version to Florian and Sebastian Haller, Franz Höllinger and Bernadette Müller. Here is the first, yet unpublished, version in the English language.

¹ Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North, (New York: Review Books, 2009). The novel, written in Arabic, was first published in Beirut in 1966 and translated into many languages; I read the German translation Zeit der Nordwanderung. Roman aus dem Sudan, (Basel, 1998).
to know an alien world and a deep split between this continent and his own society. However, T. returned to Africa – as against many of his contemporaries today who prefer a life, often harder, in Europe to returning to an even more depressing, chaotic home country. This essay narrates what the travels of this man, through Europe and over half a century later, might look like.

In the year 2050, T. decided to travel again to Europe – the continent in which he had studied and worked for many years. With a friend from the times of study, Roger K. from London, he agreed upon meeting in Tunis at the North African coast, to ferry across the Mediterranean to Italy and then journey further on by train and plane toward the North. T. had experienced this before. He had already traveled that route more than half a century ago. Crossing quietly the blue southern Mediterranean, along the islands of Lampedusa and Pantelleria, T.'s attention was caught by the fact that the many camps, military and police stations which in earlier times had “received” the refugees from the South and were visible from the ships, had disappeared altogether. Now it looked as if in the small harbors happy people were going about, natives and foreigners mixed up, and everybody moving freely. In the port of Agrigento where T. and his friend got ashore, they recognized the vivid sea traffic going on between Sicily and North Africa.

T. was highly interested in learning more about the situation inland, in the island of Sicily. He knew that the state of Italy and the European Union had pumped in huge sums of money there, for agrarian and structural development. The goal was to fight the century-old, seemingly insurmountable backwardness and high unemployment of this island. He was surprised to see that the building ruins which had been visible everywhere in past times had now disappeared and been replaced by a multitude of small, pleasing industrial and commercial buildings. The valleys and high plateaus of the island, once covered by large plantations of olive trees and vineyards which had made a somewhat monotonic impression, now formed a diversified, carefully cultivated agrarian landscape. His companion told T. that the European Union had completely abandoned its agrarian and regional support programs after massive demonstrations against them throughout Europe. They were substituted by a direct, functional financial compensation between the rich and poor states and regions of the Union in which investors who created new jobs were supported directly and substantively. In this way, a direct incentive was given for profitable investments of local, regional and international investors and for a cost-effective acting of public authorities. The two century-old troubles of Sicily – massive misdirected investments in large infrastructural plants and widespread corruption – had ebbed away. The government
in Rome was able to withdraw the ten thousands of policemen and soldiers who had been fighting against the Mafia on the island.

Astonished, T. noticed these facts and he asked his friend to go on directly to Northern Italy; there, he wanted to visit Bologna, the oldest European university town, where he had completed an enjoyable term as a visiting student. Bologna was out of recognition. In former times it was peopled nearly exclusively by Italian students; now it was filled with students from countries all over the world. Students from black Africa in particular. T. was taken with the attractive female black students who had adopted casual Italian elegance in make-up, hairstyles, clothing and demeanor – in fact he felt some pride about them. Puzzled by all this, he asked his friend for an explanation. He was told the following: In 2015, the European Union had approved a comprehensive plan for the concerted development of European and African human resources. Since that year, all major European universities went on to reserve a significant portion of their college admissions – rarely less than 20% – for students from Africa. In order to adjust their level of preparation to that of native students, many of them had also established high-quality secondary schools and other training schools in African cities. These institutions were soon stormed by young people, so that demanding entrance examinations soon had to be implemented. The consequence was that those who were selected to study in Europe and who graduated there began to form a new intellectual elite, which was often superior to their fellow European students. A series of treaties between EU-member states and African countries ensured that the largest part of the graduates returned to Africa. In most cases, this is not felt as a constraint since they are intensely sought after in their countries of origin, where they can expect attractive careers and responsible occupational positions. All this was the consequence of new, close and cooperative economic relations between Africa and Europe. Europe had contributed significantly to the fact that Africa could move to a path of dynamic economic development, which provided ample opportunities for its large, young population and promised a much brighter future than for China, say, with its strongly aging population. In the area of sports, Africa had consolidated its status as a world power achieved already in the late twentieth century with its long-range runners and through the victory by Nigeria at the world championship of football in 2020. Europe itself profited from the academic accomplishments of the young Africans. Quite a number of African graduates were employed in top European research institutions, where they contributed – together with colleague from other countries around the world – to the fact that the European Union was on its way to surpass the United States as the first science nation of the world.
Having seen all this, our friends decided to go on by train northward to Austria and its capital Vienna. As the train was leaving Bologna, T. and his friend could relax and observe the wide and fertile plains of the Po. The train passed through the old city of Verona (in Roman times an important provincial capital with a large amphitheater and in late Antiquity capital of the Visigoth king Dietrich) and entered the long-drawn valley of the Adige. Through the same route the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had travelled so often from the North to South. Later Johann Wolfgang von Goethe came through when he made his famous journey to Italy. After passing the medieval bishop town of Trento, they entered the province of Südtirol (South-Tyrol) where the German language-speaking area begins. T. admired the mellow green grasslands and woods and the castles on the hills of this wonderful Alpine province. The friend explained to T. that over the course of the Napoleonic wars the province of Tyrrol had defended itself for several years successfully against superior French and Bavarian troops. Later, during the period of fascism in Italy, the Southern part, Südtirol (which became part of Italy after 1918) was subjected to harsh measures in order to get rid of any remnants of German culture. T. remembered that during his first stay in Europe newspapers had been full of reports of violent uprisings in this province, voicing demands for an end to immigration from the Southern provinces of Italy or even for secession from Italy and the re-unification with Austria. Responsible political leaders, however, were able to channel this movement into a peaceful process of negotiations (T. was shivering at the thought of what could have happened if in South Tyrol, as in Yugoslavia before its breakup, chauvinistic-nationalistic leaders had been in power). In the end, the state of Italy granted a high level of political and cultural autonomy to the province. This led to a dynamic economic development and for decades now Italian and German-speaking people have been living together peacefully; throughout Europe, in fact, ethnic minorities look at this province as a model for the successful resolution of ethnic conflicts. They also learn from this case that, against centralizing forces, no real progress is possible toward the granting of local political autonomy and democracy without the people’s resistance and uprising.

As the train reached the last town in Italy, the small city of Sterzing (Vipiteno) in the center of the Alps, T. was astonished again when gazing through the windows at the 3500 meter high mountains covered with glaciers – a sight which reminded him of the Ruwenzori Mountains in Rwanda and Uganda in the center of Africa, whence the largest rivers of that continent spring. His friend explained to T. that Sterzing had already existed as a post along the Roman road from Italy to Germany and was a rich town in medieval times.
due to mines in the surrounding mountains. At that time, it was the home
city of Michael Gaismayr (1490-1532), a leader of the insurgent troops dur-
ing the Bauernkriege of the early modern period, who had also sketched out
an ideal new and egalitarian constitution for the province of Tyrol.\(^2\) Driving
over the Brenner Pass and changing trains at Innsbruck toward the east, it
took our friends only half a day to reach Vienna.

The city of Vienna was of interest for T. not only because of its great history
and many sights but also because a few decades ago it was the model for an
over-aged population and for its hostility toward strangers. An ephemeral
wave of immigration in the last third of the twentieth century, during the war
in Yugoslavia and the fall of the Iron Curtain, had produced a population and
birth increase. This came to an end, however, after right-wing governments
had commanded over a practical stop of immigration to Austria. The second
and third generation of immigrants had adapted their rate of fertility to the
low level of the native population. As a consequence, many kindergartens
and schools were closed down, as were departments for obstetrics and gy-
ecology in hospitals. So much so that it often was very difficult for young,
pregnant women to find a place where to deliver their babies.\(^3\)

But here again, T. experienced a surprise. The town appeared unexpectedly
alive and youthful. No old, but rather young people filled the streets, sub-
ways and public places. How could that be? The reason was, as his friend
told him, that the town, and Austria in general, had finally opened themselves
up to immigrants. The attitudes of men and women, employers and employ-
ees, unions and political associations toward issues of partnership, marriage
and family, employment and occupation had fundamentally changed – away
from the conservative model prevalent in earlier times in the German-speak-
ing countries and toward the model which had partly existed in Scandi-
vonian countries and France for a long time. Marriage and family were not
longer seen by men and women as arenas of struggle for recognition and

\(^2\) This constitution, called *Entwurf einer Tiroler Landesordnung* has
aroused quite high interest also among democratic socialists in East
Europe; a Czech historian, for instance, wrote a remarkable book on the
Bauernkriege in Tyrol and the role of Michael Gaismayr therein (Josef

\(^3\) In autumn 2008, the cabaret *Die Stachelschweine* in Berlin staged a
sketch of such a situation in the year 2030. In this year, unexpectedly
a baby was born in Berlin – an event which led to chaos because there
were no more any midwives and birth clinics in the town.
power, employment and occupation were no longer vested rights one had to defend tooth and nail. The reason for this change was that the flexibility of the access to jobs and the change between them had become much larger; begetting and raising children were not regarded any longer mainly as a hindrance for occupational careers and a restriction on free-time activities but as a chance to provide meaning to life, beyond employment and money, and to secure a socially rich and fulfilled life also in old age. This was supported by a variegated supply of institutional supports for parents in the provision of children which opened many different ways of combining work, marital and family life, and leisure. All this, however, was achieved without constraining all the people into one more or less uniform, state-regulated style of life (as it had happened in some Scandinavian countries) and preserving the strengths of the Austrian Gemütlichkeit and effortlessness which by their German “brothers” is often interpreted as slouchiness. Spending one evening in the famous vineyard district of Grinzing, our friend recognized that even the melancholy–doleful spirit of the Viennese Heurigenlieder had acquired a more cheerful and optimistic tone.

In Vienna, our friends decided to continue by plane to the Polish capital Warsaw. This town was of interest for T. because he knew that the new eastern member states of the European Union had experienced massive economic and social decline as a consequence of the downfall of state-socialism and the radical implementation of neo-liberal capitalist market principles. Western European enterprises took over Polish factories with low productivity, closed them down and flooded the consumer market with imported goods. As a consequence, unemployment exploded, poverty increased and the country became nearly ungovernable. From an earlier visit to Warsaw, T. knew that the old center of this town – the king’s palace and the market place – had been renovated soon after the political turnabout. During that visit, however, he had also observed in the outer districts of the town crumbling house fronts, dilapidated streets and pavements and tattered old people. Phenomena like these attested that the transition problems were not resolved yet. Moreover, new problems – homelessness, alcoholism, prostitution, criminality and other “blessings” of western capitalist societies – were escalating. Our friends, therefore, did not waste time by visiting tourist sites but immediately walked toward one of the fringe areas of the town. Also here, the reader should see T.’s face: Where formerly huge gray and dull apartment buildings and large-scale industrial plants were ranging over the landscape, now the friends saw pretty living houses, colorful painted apartment buildings, interrupted by industrial-commercial areas in which many new, small and medium-sized enterprises had established themselves, but also a few
modern, large buildings accommodating big Polish and foreign firms. Investors from many parts of Western Europe, but also Polish entrepreneurs had created a whole new city district here. In this case as well, the new economic and industrial policy of the European Union had contributed its share; for two decades, its aim was no longer to assist and subsidize large, multinational corporations (mostly through means covered to the general public) but to provide incentives for enterprises of many different sectors which made it possible for them to invest profitably in the former state-socialist countries. The new employment opportunities created by these enterprises had changed Poland from a century-old trend of emigration⁴, a country of deadbeats in the eyes of many Germans,⁵ to an immigration country. In this way, more than two million foreign workers, mainly from Belorussia and the Ukraine, but also from Russia, Turkey, and Central Asian countries participated in the Polish economic miracle.

T. was amazed. However, a deep skepticism lingered in his mind concerning the development of the European Union itself. During his first residence in Europe, he had also visited Brussels. At that time, he was impressed but also frightened as he saw the huge, intimidating office buildings which were housing the countless government agencies, the lobby and interest organizations from the member states and from around the globe in this new “capital” of Europe. It could be expected that the law of relentless growth affecting public bureaucracies would not cease in the European Union and that the continuous increase in the size and influence of the “Eurocracy”, the new EU-bureaucracy, would lead to its expansion toward an uncontrollable new Leviathan. As our two friends strolled along the rue Belliard and arrived at Berlaymont Palace, the domicile of the EU-Commission, they could not believe their eyes: A large inscription over the entrance of the building said that this was the seat of a new “European University.” His friend told T. the

⁴ In the late 1970s, I saw results of a representative survey among Polish people asking them which in their opinion was the most effective way to go ahead in life. The first, most outstanding reason given was: To emigrate!

⁵ In order to caricature this image, young German and Polish people have established the Klub der polnischen Versager (Club of the Polish Deadbeats/Klub Polskich Nieudachnikow) in Berlin. This club organizes a variety of social, cultural and political events, some of which I attended during my research stay at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung in autumn 2008. See the homepage of the club at: http://www.polnischeversager.de/.
following: In the year 2020, a genuine revolution had happened in Europe: A broad citizen movement in all member states had fought a hard and long fight against nearly all established political parties and established a completely new orientation of the basic principles of the European Union. In a new, short and precise constitution it was prescribed that the EU had to limit itself exclusively to the setting of basic economic and social principles and that the implementation and administration of all concrete policies and the distribution of all financial means had to be left exclusively to the member states and regions. Since that time, important decisions had to be submitted regularly to European-wide compulsory referenda. As a consequence of this, the irresistible trend toward centralization and bureaucratization of the EU - between 1968 and 2006, the number of EU-officers had increased by 10,000 persons every year\footnote{See the exact data in Max Haller, *European Integration as an Elite Process: The Failure of a Dream*? (London/ New York: Routledge), p.163.} - had been stopped completely.

The new EU-constitution determined also that all EU-agencies and offices had to be decentralized and those residing in Brussels had to be transferred into cities of the member states. (The citizens of Brussels, first resisting the idea, soon became happy about it, however, since it re-installed “normal” living conditions in the Belgian capital, including affordable prices of apartments, restaurants and the like). In this way, a stop was put to the old aim of many politicians of making the European Union into a new world power, in military terms as well. The fear of many was that in this way the EU would become a play-thing of the old and new highly armed world powers – such as the United States and China. But this did not come about. Quite the contrary, the complete and confident turning away from this aim induced also other, large democratic states, like Brazil, India and Japan, to swing into anti-military principles of international politics. The United States too were pushed onto the sidelines with their enduring imperialist ambitions – aside from the increasing economic difficulties stemming from their excessive armament expenditures. (For the same reason, Russia had to bid farewell to this aim as early as the end of the twentieth century). China also came to the conclusion that it might be wrong to emulate the American model in this regard. And for Africa, this re-orientation contributed to the fact that a new and cooperative relation between Europe and Africa had been developed – to the advantage of both.
Epilogue of the author: The immense split between Europe and Africa, but also the close interconnection of the fate of these two continents came to my mind first in the course of a travel along the Nile through Egypt, the Sudan up to the Ethiopian highlands in December 2008/January 2009. (Later on, I could deepen my knowledge of Africa through a small research in Ethiopia and teaching at the St. Augustine University of Tanzania in Mwanza). It was no accident, therefore, that I have put the relation between Africa and Europe at the center of this small essay. The relation between these two continents might become the determining problem for Europe in the decades to come. While this is one of the richest continents on earth, Africa is the poorest and one of the fastest growing as well: Its present number of about 900 million inhabitants will increase by 2050 to one and a half, if not two billion, while the population of Europe will stagnate, maybe even decline. The deep split in the levels of socio-economic development and standards of living between Africa and Europe today carries the consequence of a massive drive toward emigration; it could become even stronger in the future. The inhuman compartmentalization of Europe against Africa by a new “Iron Curtain” (which exists physically around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco) and paramilitary border-control EU-units in the Mediterranean will not be able to withstand this pressure.
