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The 1970s in Europe:
A Period of
Disillusionment or Promise?

by

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Most people see the 1970s as a decade of popular music, films and design, as the time of Michael Jackson, Bob Marley, Mireille Mathieu, and *A Clockwork Orange*. But those historians who are now starting to work on the 1970s often discuss other topics, even though they may have adored this popular music as youngsters. In a recent lecture in Berlin, David Ellwood, an Italo-British historian of the Cold War, called the 1970s the most shocking decade in Europe since the Second World War. Konrad Jarausch, a German-American historian, gave his book on the 1970s the less spectacular, but still depressing title *The End of Confidence? (Das Ende der Zuversicht?)*. Gabriele Metzler, my colleague at the Humboldt University, called her recent book *A Crisis of Governing since the 1970s?* and likewise Antonio Varsori, an Italian historian, speaks of 'the crisis of the 1970s' ('la crisi degli anni settanta'). Conversely, Philippe Chassaingne, a French specialist on British history, chose the subtitle *Beginnings of our Modernity (origine de notre modernité)* for a recent book on the 1970s. And the British author Alwyn Turner, seemingly in contradiction to Gabriele Metzler and Antonio Varsori, gave his book on the 1970s the title *Crisis? What Crisis?* So at the moment when the archives are opened and historians take over the decade of the 1970s, two interpretations emerge: the dark interpretation of decline, of crisis, of disillusionment on the one hand, and the bright interpretation of the beginnings of our modernity, of new realism (Tony Judt) or even of promise on the other.

This debate among historians will be the topic of my lecture which looks at the 1970s not as a specific era, but as a major turning point or turning period of the 20th century. I shall first present the dark view, then I shall present to you the bright interpretation of the 1970s, and at the end, in a long conclusion, I shall ask how

important the 1970s are as a turning point, in what way the 1970s are a very special turning point, different from most others, in what way this is a European turning point, and which view is in the end more convincing, the dark view or the bright view.

But why the 1970s, why not another decade? In my view the debate on the 1970s among historians is emerging for four reasons. Firstly, the 1970s have a special charm as a turning point. This primarily covers economics and culture and to a far lesser degree politics and international relations as was the case for most other turning points such as 1789, 1815, 1848, 1914, 1945 and 1989. In the 1970s no war or revolution broke out and no empire broke down (except the Portuguese colonial empire). Secondly the 1970s are particularly attractive because of the burning topics of this era: the oil shocks; the breakdown of the Western currency system of Bretton Woods; the slowdown of Keynesianism and state intervention; political violence; the upheaval in values; the massive criticism of the interventionist state; the new social movements and dissident groups; the new debate on environmental and energy policies; contrasts between secularism and the rising importance of religion in politics; the new impetus in European integration and in Cold War *détente*. Thirdly the debate on the 1970s is stimulated by contrasting views from different generations of historians: those who lived in the *trente glorieuses* and saw the deplorable end of this period in the 1970s, and the younger historians, now also established, who experienced only the post-boom situation and see it as normal. A fourth and more general reason why historians discuss decades such as the 1970s is one of their obsessions – their passion for discussing upheavals and turning points and for singling out historical eras. Ranke's famous and bold dictum 'Every epoch is imme-

diate to God' ('Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott') even tries to use God for this passion. The passion is perhaps the major reason why historians are different from social scientists and cultural scientists, who are more interested in typologies and model-building. Historians love to discuss questions such as 'What is Victorian about the Victorian period?' or 'Is there a long 19th century from 1789 to 1914 or a short 20th century from 1914 until 1989?'. This passion is also behind the debate on whether the 1970s are *the* major turning point between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the end of the division of Europe in 1989. I want, as I said, to raise this question with a special accent: I am asking the question not for a specific country, say Britain or Germany, but for the whole of Europe.

The Dark View of the 1970s

I shall start with the main arguments of the dark view, which – as you will see – is not homogeneous in the sense of a theory, a political direction or a specific national view.

1. In this view the 1970s are shocking, first of all, because of the emerging political violence in Europe: the terrorism in Spain carried out by the Basque ETA, the violent RAF in West Germany, the even more violent Italian *brigadi rossi*, and also the violence in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics. This was and still is shocking, since a crucial and astonishing achievement of the years after World War II was the end not only of international, but also of domestic political violence in Europe, in contrast to the post-war years after World War I, when political violence was widespread in many continental European countries. The post-Second World War achievement of non-violent

domestic politics was endangered in the 1970s in four major European countries.

2. A second shock was economic: the two oil shocks in 1973 and 1979 with the rise of the oil price from about 3 dollars per barrel to almost 25 dollars and even almost 50 dollars in 1980. Today some historians say that the oil shocks were helpful, since the Europeans became aware of the costs of this type of energy. However, historians who take the dark view argue with good reason that the oil shocks had very negative effects on the European economies. They contributed to high inflation during the 1970s, which was stopped later. They also contributed to the reduction of economic growth rates in Europe and, hence, to the end of a quarter of a century of exceptionally high rates of economic growth and low rates of unemployment. As a consequence, the extraordinary increase in real incomes, the affluent public budgets and the generous public spending also came to an end. The first oil shock was also accompanied by the breakdown of the international currency system of Bretton Woods with its fixed exchange rates. Bretton Woods had been helpful for international trade and had given much of the responsibility for the international currency system to one single actor, the American government, rather than to groups of rich countries which are often unable to make good common decisions.

3. Closely related to the economic change was a cultural change: the end of the optimistic view of a future with continuously rising incomes and living standards, a continuous improvement through urban planning and a continuous decline in sicknesses due to progress in medical research. The grand visions of the future presented by futurology, the new scientific discipline, were less accepted. Scepticism about economic and social prospects increased, expressed in a radical

way by the slogan 'no future'. In this context post-modernism, starting at the end of the 1970s, is often criticized in the dark view because of its exclusive focus on crisis, on chaos, on contingency, and on the misjudgements and errors of enlightenment and rationality. The rise of pop art in the 1970s is also seen as negative because of its forced proximity to trivial mass consumption and publicity, and because of its rejection of classic optimist aesthetics. Literary critics such as Marcel Reich-Ranicki deplore the obvious lack of programmatic groups of writers in the 1970s. In history and the social sciences the 1970s brought new concepts mainly from cultural sciences and philosophy, replacing social science concepts such as modernization, which is seen as a deplorable trend by the dark view, disregarding the arrival of new topics such as gender, consumption, work, intellectuals, elites, and disregarding new approaches such as international comparison.

What is more, the positive image of the United States as the harbinger of modernity, democracy and high living standards changed substantially. The Vietnam War and the impeachment of the American President made it more negative. There were fears of American cultural predominance in Europe, reinforced by the new dominant position of American film in Europe, the seemingly influential role of American fast food in European food culture, and also the rise of the PC which was often seen as part of the American culture.

4. In the dark view the 1970s were also disillusionment because they marked the end of the golden years of the welfare state in a dual sense. From the 1970s onwards the welfare consensus disappeared and scepticism became more important in the public debate on the welfare state, but also on urban planning, on the health service and on education. Criticism came from

various political quarters: from the neo-liberal side because of the high costs of the welfare state and the threat to individual initiative; from the new social movements because of the immobile social bureaucracies and the overly exclusive coalition between state, big business and the big trade unions; and finally also from the supporters of the welfare state because of its apparent inadequacies, especially for the new poor, for women who did not work outside the household, and for people in the fourth age. In addition, the nature of welfare reforms also tended to change. Reforms increasingly did not extend welfare services and payments, but were aimed at reducing costs, increasing efficiency and encouraging self-help. This was not a sudden and brutal change, but a gradual transition, brought about mainly by the less affluent public budgets. This happened in social security, in health, in education, and in urban planning.

5. A further disillusionment was the decline in the governability of the European democracies parallel to a decline in the legitimacy of the Eastern European regimes. Governability declined not only because of the economic difficulties just mentioned. The decline was also related to the shrinking of the Christian Democratic, Conservative, and Social Democratic electorate, the rise of the one-issue-parties and new social movements, to the new volatility of voters. Some historians argue that the problems of governability, along with the new political violence, led to particularly rigid divisions in political culture during the 1970s with less chances of governing by compromise and broad consensus. These rigid differences between left and right could be observed in many spheres: in foreign policy, in domestic security policies, in education, welfare and health poli-

cies, even in consumption, in music and restaurants, in clothing and hair cuts, in raising families.

6. During the 1970s belief in secularization as part of modernization became less sure. The role of religion and the churches also changed, with religion regaining some of its importance. To be sure, the most spectacular event was outside Europe, the mullah revolution in Iran, which was a mysterious sort of revolution for many Europeans, so different from normal European revolutions. But it was clear that the importance of religion was growing not only in the Near East, but also in Europe. The election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 was a sign of things to come. I remember very well Fernand Braudel, who was clearly a laicist French historian, foretold in his seminar in 1978 that religion would become a major future topic in politics and therefore also in history. If this forecast had been given by a British or German historian, nobody would remember. But in France, with its strong laicist values, it was an indicator of change.

7. The 1970s were also a disappointment after some hope in three important spheres of international relations: in European integration, in détente during the Cold War, and in the Euro-American relationship. All projects of European integration during the years of hope at the beginning of the 1970s either failed or did not meet expectations. The project of a European currency and economic union, the Werner Plan of 1973, failed because of the end of Bretton Woods and because of the enormous contrasts in budgetary and currency policies between the member states. The project of political union, the Tindemans report of 1974, also failed and there was no resolution by the member states of the European Council. The only success was enlargement of the European Economic Community, through

the inclusion of Britain, Denmark, and Ireland, in 1973. However, it was a long time before the conflict with Britain over the budget question was resolved. Détente in the Cold War during the 1970s seemed to proceed well with negotiations between the USA and the USSR on disarmament, especially of nuclear weapons, and also in the negotiations of the Helsinki Agreement of 1977. The West German government's *Ostpolitik* also seemed to have reached its goals. However, at the end of the 1970s the Cold War returned with the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan and the rearmament policies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The agreements in diplomatic relations between Western Europe and the US government became less easy, and the American Secretary of State called the year 1973, originally planned as the year of Europe in the USA, 'the year that never was'.

Connected with the dark view is the idea that the 1950s and 1960s were a glorious period, part of the *trente glorieuses*, as the French economist Jean Fourastié called it, the *Wirtschaftswunder* or *miracolo economico* as it was called at the time in Germany and Italy, the golden age in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, who was referring to both Western *and* Eastern Europe. It is important that these notions are used only by historians of Europe. Notions with a similar meaning cannot be found in works in the USA, or Latin America or China or India or Africa. They do have golden ages, but not in the 1950s and 1960s.

The period of the 1950s and 1960s is seen as bright for several reasons: the continuous high growth, almost Chinese growth in our eyes; the enormous rise in real wages, which in 1975 were about four times as high as in 1950 in France, three times in Germany and Sweden, more than twice as high in Britain and Italy; the huge increase in public budgets, which in 1975 were between

ten and twenty times as high as in 1950 in nominal terms; the golden age of the welfare state, of city and highway planning, of improved health services, of educational expansion; belief in the continuous progress of mankind through planning and state intervention, in both Western and Communist variants, and finally also the advancement in international co-operation instead of war, increased European economic integration, but also transatlantic integration in the military sense of NATO, and indeed in the economic sense through the World Bank and the GATT negotiations; in other words the *pax americana*, and for Eastern Europeans, the guarantee of peace by the Soviet bloc.

Often connected with the dark view is a pessimist view of the period since the 1980s, the continuous increase in unemployment and poverty, the stagnation of real income and living standards, the rising inequality of incomes, and difficulties in entering the labour market for young graduates on all levels, including members of the middle classes. Dark in this view were not only the 1970s, but also the period since.

The Bright View of the 1970s

There is also a bright view of the 1970s. This contrasting view is also not homogeneous. Here are the main arguments:

1. The 1970s are seen, firstly, as a reinforcement of democracy. Some historians even call it the second democratization of Europe. It happened, however, in different ways for different regions of Europe. In Western Europe, the 1970s were the golden age of the new social movements, the new women's movement, the regional movement (which started in the 1960s), the environmental movement, the human rights' movement, the Third World movement and finally also the

peace movement. These movements were different in geography, methods, supporters, and goals, but they all led to new ways of participation for the citizens in Europe and hence to more democracy. In Southern Europe the right-wing authoritarian regimes were transformed into Western democracies, mainly by domestic forces and men, also with help from other European countries, but without military intervention from outside. The Franco regime, the Salazar regime, and the Greek dictatorship of the military generals came to an end. The heavy burden of dictatorships in Western Europe was gone. Democracy became a more powerful model. In the Eastern part of Europe new circles of dissidents emerged who were in fundamental opposition to the regime and who did not share the Communist principles. Especially in Poland the so-called KOR group opposition emerged, as well as Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia. The milieu of artists in Central Eastern Europe often tried to become more autonomous because of their fundamental disillusionment with the Communist regimes. Beyond the small groups of explicit opposition, confidence in the regimes generally declined. This is why Adam Mishnik, former dissident and now liberal newspaper editor in Poland, believes that 1989 started in the 1970s.

2. The second argument of the bright view of the 1970s is economic liberalization and thus the mobilization of economic potentials. Liberalization was introduced, on the one hand, at the international level with the end of Bretton Woods, that is, with the end of fixed exchange rates that were only changed in conflicts and difficult negotiations between governments. The new free floating of currencies, which was strongly advocated by the neo-liberal economists of the Mont Pelerin Society, reflected more directly the changing economic

strengths and weaknesses of the nations. It also gave more responsibility to the Europeans and the Japanese for the global currency system, rather than giving sole responsibility to the government of the USA. At the same time the 1970s were also a period of greater liberalization in domestic economic policies. The fight against inflation of up to 25% by means of greater public budget discipline was successful. The rising influence of monetarists and neo-liberals in public debates, in government policies, especially in Britain, and the rise of private media paved the way for deregulation, while *de facto* deregulation only emerged from the 1980s onwards in public enterprises, in public services, in welfare services, and in urban planning.

3. As a consequence, the optimism of the *trente glorieuses*, regarded as naïve, was gradually replaced by a sceptical pragmatism, which could see more clearly the negative side of the *trente glorieuses*, to which we will return in a moment. Planning became a routine operation rather than an exciting political adventure. The collective benefits, very much at the centre of earlier visions in East and West, were replaced by a stronger sensitivity to individual situations and liberties. Power came back as a topic instead of grand visions with power left out. Contingencies were taken as seriously as general social rules. Futurology lost much of its impact.

4. The bright view regards the 1970s as a transition towards more social and cultural options for the individual. The conformism of the period before was gradually given up. Let me give two examples, one from family history and another from the history of social classes. The former predominant standard European family model with the mother as housewife and the father as breadwinner gave way to a variety of family models: the model with *both* parents active as breadwinners, the

stable family with no formal marriage, the single-parent family, the patch-work family, and the couple choosing not to have children, also new models of family life with more equal roles for men and women. The former predominant conformist class consumption dissolved and gave way to an individual mix of consumption styles combining upper class and lower class elements: football with wine, jeans with pearl necklaces, pizza with playing golf. The pressures towards conformism of the period before gave way to new pluralities of lifestyles. The individualization process started in the 1970s. So did the sociological theory of individualization.

5. International relations were not dominated by failure as much as the pessimistic view believes. The new upswing in European integration in the early 1970s, which failed, was still important in setting the expectations for the future by the three general goals mentioned before. From the 1970s onward European integration was only accepted by its supporters if the European currency, the economic policy and the political unity of the European Union advanced, and also if the European Union were enlarged to include, if desired, the other parts of the Europe. Substantial parts of these three goals were reached in the next quarter of a century in the spirit of the early 1970s, though the common European economic policy and European political union are still on the agenda. The same is true of détente. Even if détente seemed to have failed in the short run with the return of the Cold War at the end of the 1970s, the Helsinki Agreement had important long-term consequences, since the hope for human rights in Eastern Europe was encouraged. In part, the return to democracy in Eastern Europe was the result of détente and the new human rights policy of the 1970s. Moreover, the image of the USA in Europe was not simply a

story of decline. At the same time political and cultural bonds intensified because of the new international social movements, because of the rising interconnectedness of scientific research, and because of the growing impact of the American film in Europe which provoked crucial debates, for instance on the film *Holocaust*. The response to the introduction of the PC in Europe was not only negative; it also became an essential part of life for younger Europeans.

This bright view of the 1970s, which is also not homogeneous and includes Eastern and Western views, left and right-wing arguments, is often connected with a more sceptical view of the 1950s and 1960s and a greater awareness of the shortcomings of this period: the 'limits of growth'; the waste of energy; the threat to the environment; the shortcomings of the welfare state for the new poor, for immigrants, for housewives, and for the fourth age; the mis-planning and shortcomings of health services, of urban planning and of mass education; the lack of feeling for costs and efficiency, but also the lack of interest in badly organized social groups. The 1970s are seen as having positive developments in all these spheres.

Conclusion

Let me finish with a long conclusion by asking how important, how special, how European this turning point of the 1970s was, and whether it represented disillusionment or promise.

1. The 1970s were undoubtedly an important turning point in terms of the reduced rates of growth and rising unemployment; the farewell to Keynesian policies and the arrival of neo-liberal approaches; the beginnings of deregulation in the media; rising inequality; new social movements and the decline of classical trade unions;

new options in family life and in consumption; a new understanding of immigration to Europe as permanent; a different Americanization of consumption manifested in burger restaurants, mass movies and the new PC; new views of the future in high culture, in popular culture, as well as in the human sciences; a return of religion; a new attempt at détente and the new role of human rights in international relations; a new approach in European integration; a new test of the governability of Western European democracies. Most of these tendencies persist until the present. This is why many writers take the turning point of the 1970s as an element for the organization of their books: Eric Hobsbawm as well Harold James, Tony Judt as well Marc Mazower.

2. The turning point of the 1970s has a very special, even unique character in 20th-century history: it was not a turning point imposed by wars or by the breakdown of empires such as in 1918, 1945, 1989, but by rapid economic changes and by cultural upheavals. It was a 'silent revolution', an upheaval beyond spectacular political events, a soft turning point.

In some ways this turning point is an alternative to 1989. During the 1970s the centre of change was in Western Europe with strong effects in Eastern Europe. In 1989 the centre of change was in Central and Eastern Europe with strong effects in Western Europe. The turning point of the 1970s shows up in historiography, but it is not remembered in memorial days. It is rarely the topic of speeches by politicians. There is no single photo that can be seen as the most telling one for the 1970s. It is also difficult to find eyewitnesses for the 1970s as a major general turning point. I personally did not understand the 1970s at that time. To be sure, social scientists and perhaps even some historians were aware of the

fundamental change. But they could not find a comprehensive term which would grasp the turn in all its dimensions. By contrast, in 1989 everybody was aware of a dramatic turning point. 1989 is at the centre of commemorative events, of speeches by politicians and historians. There are some photos which are usually taken as symbols of 1989, especially the one with young adults standing on the wall around the Brandenburg Gate. Eyewitnesses for 1989 are constantly interviewed on TV. To be sure, a contrast exists between a bright and a dark view of 1989 similar to that of the 1970s. These views sometimes even cover similar developments. But it seems to me that the bright view clearly predominates for 1989, though perhaps less clearly in the Eastern part of Europe because of the economic crisis.

3. The 1970s were in fact a *European* turning point. It was a specifically European turning point, since it was more distinct in Europe than elsewhere in the world. The economic turning point was to a large extent more brutal in Europe, since the rate of economic growth had been far higher in Europe than elsewhere, with the exception of Japan. The other element of the economic turn, the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, was admittedly a Western rather than a European event. However, it affected the countries of Europe in a special way. It was a push towards more European responsibility for global currency policies. This responsibility was much more difficult for Europe as a whole than for Japan, because of the hugely contrasting national economic policies in Western Europe. The cultural upheaval was also a special European turn, since the rise of the so-called post-materialistic values had been more distinct in Western Europe than in most other parts of the world, and so the move towards more materialistic

values, due to the economic difficulties, was also more distinct in Europe.

The much more difficult question: Is it in fact a turning point for *the whole of* Europe or does it exclude the Eastern part of Europe, the Southern part and also Britain? Is this a regional rather than a European turning point? To put it another way: is it only a Rhenish turning point from the Rhenish model to the Rhenish sickness, a European history through Rhenish eyes?

I shall start with the Eastern part of Europe. Here, in fact, the 1970s were also a turning point. The economic dynamics also slowed down. However, this did not yet manifest itself in a slowdown of growth rates, but in a rising scarcity of consumer goods and in increased international debt. The cultural upheaval was also distinct, but in a different way. The Communist regimes started to lose their attractiveness. Not only did more Western visitors return disappointed from the USSR. More importantly, the opposition in Eastern Europe started to change, as has already been mentioned.

In Southern Europe the 1970s were also a time of upheaval, but in a different sense. In Spain, Portugal and Greece this was a return of democracy, in many ways also modernization of the economies and the societies, above all a definite opening towards the West, which was previously limited to the elites, to migrants and to the tourism economy. These two 1970s, the Western European one and the Southern European one, are not two totally independent turning points, but are connected by the increasing economic difficulties, by *détente*, by the growing attractiveness of European integration, by the new social movements, and by political interconnections, which contributed to the fall of dictatorships in Southern Europe.

At first glance, Britain was different. Economic growth was reduced to a far lesser extent, since wealthy Britain was far less involved in the earlier *trente glorieuses*, a glorious period for the impoverished continental European countries. But Britain played an important role in the 1970s in various ways. It was not only important for the popular music and life-style of that decade. It also took part in the new social movements, perhaps more so than in the student movement of the late 1960s. Britain was especially important for the change in European economic policies, for the decline of Keynesianism and the rise of monetarism, and deregulation. Hence Britain provided an important momentum for the 1970s in Europe.

4. Were the 1970s in the end a period of disillusionment or promise? They were a strong disillusionment in two respects: they shattered the economic hope of permanently strong economic growth with a continuous rise in salaries and public budgets, with continuous full employment, and the social expectation of a continuous expansion of welfare and health services and continuous improvement of the housing situation by urban planning. In three other respects, however, the 1970s did not represent disillusionment: political violence did not persist and, what was very important, the governments did not overreact and did not substantially reduce civil liberties. European integration did not constantly fall short of the aims of the early 1970s and the period of *détente* did not simply end, but had long-term effects. Were the 1970s a period of promise? They were not a period of new promises in the sense of grand visions, but a positive turn in three respects: a period of reinforcement of democracy, almost as important as 1945 and 1989; a period of a new pragmatism and efficiency instead of grand visions of a new society in

international relations as well as in domestic policies,
and also a period of more options for the individual.

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