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Charlemagne

Calling time on progress

Europeans thought they were progressing towards an ideal civilisation. time is up, and it hurts

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VIEWED from afar, Europeans are a complacent, ungrateful lot. Nannied from cradle to the world's most generous welfare systems, they squeal like spoiled children when asked up just a few of their playthings. As governments in the euro zone trim benefits and raise retirement age in the wake of the sovereign-debt crisis, a wave of indignation has rung off a wave of protests set in. "Unfair!" thundered Antonis Samaras, the Greek conservative opposition leader, this week, at the government's proposed pension-reform plans. "Totally unfair!" Martine Aubry, the French opposition Socialist leader, at her country's attempt to do the

American commentators seem particularly amused to watch Europeans "dismantle" their systems, just as America embraces European-style universal health care. Only a year ago leaders were laying into American free-marketry and declaring unbridled capitalism finished. "After listening to two years of stern and self-righteous lectures about the 'failure' of the capitalist model," writes Walter Russell Mead, an academic, "many Americans...are quietly enjoying the spectacle of the smug Europeans writhing in helpless indecision and pain over the continent's self-inflicted wounds."

Could it be, though, that behind Europe's petty, possessive talk about rights and entitlement there is something more fundamental going on? The reason that Europeans struggle to accept the need to work more, and get less from the state is that it seems to signal an abrupt reversal of decades-long advance towards an ever-more civilised society: in short, the end of progress.

The construction of the welfare state is part of a European narrative that conjures civilisation out of chaos. Take France, a country that, in welfare matters, more resembles Mediterranean Europe than its more rigorous northern neighbours. The incremental entrenchment of new rights

as a mark of progress towards a better society, dates back to just after the first world war. In 1919 the Senate limited the working day to eight hours. Léon Blum introduced the two-day holiday for all workers in 1936. François Mitterrand extended this to five weeks in the early 1980s. He also brought in retirement at 60, and the 39-hour working week. Ms Aubry, only ten years ago, reduced that to 35. By progressively shrinking the number of hours worked a week, or years worked over a lifetime, society seemed to be rolling towards some sort of ideal, with *virginity* deckchairs on the beach for all. This fits France's sense of secular, revolutionary History pushing the country forward, however fitfully, like an "endless cortege proceeding towards the light." In the words of Jules Ferry, a 19th-century educationalist. Even President Nicolas Sarkozy, averse to abstract nouns, has spoken of "the politics of civilisation" and asked economists to measure output in terms of happiness, not just growth.

Put simply, if Europe stands for something, it is decent treatment for all. To this way of thinking, to guarantee a comfortable retirement is akin to banning child labour or giving women the right to not optional perks, but badges of a civilised society. Such social preferences are what Europe stands for, and what makes it different from America. Europe may no longer be a global power, but it has much military muscle. Its churches may be empty, its spiritual fibre weak. It may not be at the cutting-edge of innovation or economic growth. But it knows how to look after its sick and take a long lunch break and abandon the office in August. The cold realisation that time has come that such progress is over, prompts anger, denial and shock.

Living with disillusion

Perhaps, however, the ideal of progress has been a myth for longer than Europeans may admit. The oil shock in 1973 was Europe's first wake-up call. Since then many countries have been creating an illusion of continual progress by running up hefty debts to finance their states. More recently profligate countries in the euro zone have hidden behind German financial credibility and low interest rates to build a way of life that they could not afford, and which the Greek debt crisis blew apart a few months ago.

Dealing with the end of progress is also partly about confronting the myth. Deep down, most Europeans probably knew that they could not go on living beyond their means for ever, even if it took them to bond markets and German finger-wagging rather than bold politicians to drive the message home. Greek, Spanish, Italian and French unions have certainly been staging protests and strikes for far this year in Greece alone. But governments are going ahead with reforms anyway. The recent protests in Greece, Spain, Italy and France have not drawn massive crowds on to the streets. As they watch tour buses disgorge groups of sprightly 60-year-old pensioners in the middle of the city into cobbled squares and historic cathedrals, most Europeans know that there is something wrong. Despite the drastic cuts and the humiliation of a rescue package, George Papandreou, the Greek prime minister, still enjoys an approval rating of 50%.

To accept that progress is an illusion is only one step. To change behaviour is another. In the end, much of Europe has chosen to put its values before growth. In reality, the 35-hour work week in France was not a mark of progress, but a brake on job creation and a spur to deindustrialisation in favour of lower-cost countries; the French may have more time on their hands, but they have little money to do anything with it. Retirement at 60 in an ageing society is not a sign of civilisation, but a cruel joke played on the next generation. The euro-zone crisis has exposed such half-truths. It may still take time before Europeans conclude that they must compromise their ideals.

to secure the growth needed to preserve what they can of their lifestyles. But if they did would be real progress.

Europe

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