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Europe as the Crisis of Play

FRANK CHOURAQUI

In this chapter, I try to introduce one hypothesis about the essence of European modernity, namely, that it should be defined as the cultural invention of seriousness. I begin by examining one of the things that we take to be raising questions about the very essence of Modern Europe, namely, the current refugee crisis and its effects on European societies and institutions. I suggest that what this crisis indicates, as it were negatively, is that Europe is to be defined as a social, historical, and existential compound informed by a tension between care and action. I continue by examining the relations between Europe so defined and the more traditional Nietzschean idea of Europe as nihilism. This allows me to make the initial suggestion more palatable as well as to analyze the implications of the tension between care and action in ontological terms. Finally, I suggest that the resulting notion of Europe is most consonant with one offhand remark from Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), where he seems to define European modernity as the dismantlement of play. I conclude that the examination of the refugee crisis and nihilism, on the one hand, and of play, on the other, reflect fruitfully on each other. All of this, it goes without saying, is highly speculative and programmatic.

Crises indicate essences: in any crisis worthy of the name, what is at stake for the entity facing the crisis is nothing short of itself. To say that something is in crisis is to say that its essence is at stake. If its essence isn't already known, as is the case for Europe, the crisis has the potential to reveal it to itself and to us. Conversely, the "What is?" questions that are so dear to philosophers always carry within them the

critical question: What would it take to make X lose their essence? “What is X?” is therefore also always “What would count as a crisis for X”? It seems widely agreed that Europe is currently facing one such crisis. Talk of “the crisis of Europe” is recurring and pervasive in public discourse. Let us assume that there is some truth to this anxious refrain. If so, such a moment of crisis is bound to offer an opportunity to uncover something essential about Europe, and I shall follow this clue.

The Refugee Crisis as a Clue to the Essence of Europe

Let me begin with a quick account of what we might call the “crisis of Europe.” My purpose here is to set up this account in a way that is intuitive and that can be easily related to the less intuitive thesis according to which the European culture is a culture of seriousness. Although it is difficult to generalize on such global events and their complex implications (including the role of other factors, such as the distrust of the elites, guilt for environment devastation, and the rise of new media), it seems acceptable to understand the phrase “crisis of Europe” as referring (among others) to two problematic responses to one current event, which is the refugee crisis.¹ Europeans and their institutions are facing a reckoning with their collective guilt of the past (associated with colonialism, racism, and sexism) and their current guilt before the human tragedy unfolding in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Conversely, but relatedly, Europe is confronting a nativist, populist, and illiberal countermovement. The renewal of the traditional trope of “fortress Europe” for example seems to cover both these responses in one expression, and it brings out that they are in fact two sides of the same coin: a walled-up (populistic) entity confronted to a tide of external interference, and responding to it with the indifference of the stones.²

It seems quite well accepted therefore that the refugee crisis represents a double challenge for Europe. The first is an existential challenge that generates a reserve of political energy currently tapped by populist movements. The second challenge is moral: the refugee crisis confronts Europe and the Europeans with their own sense of guilt, and responsibility, both current and past. Under our watch, sometimes as a result of active efforts on the part of entities that Europe cannot disown without losing its own sense of self (specific states, border police units, legal systems etc.), innocent people suffer and die tragically, on an industrial scale. If

this sense of guilt and outrage is to count as a crisis of Europe, however, we must suppose that Europe's essence is bound up with a moral project. In short, it seems we feel like there is a significant sense in which it is Europe that refuses to let refugees drown in the sea *and* that it is Europe still that allows them to drown. There is also a strong sense in which Europe cannot do this morally bankrupt entity and still be Europe. As a source of crisis for Europe, the refugee tragedy means: Is Europe still Europe when it drowns children under red tape and politicking?

It seems to me that at the intuitive level, the experience of this crisis of Europe is to be understood as an existential situation that affects European people, peoples, nations, and institutions. The question is not so much what populism and the refugee crisis *are* (something best left to sociologists and political scientists), but what is the kind of sensibility that is informed by our experience of this double crisis and that informs them in return (for example, what kind of ambient sensibility needs to be presupposed in order to explain how migration triggers populism). So, we need to ask ourselves why the refugee crisis and the populist wave are experienced in Europe as a crisis *of* Europe.

If we are to regard the refugee situation in the Mediterranean as well as the populist wave as converging into a crisis of Europe, we also have to regard them as aspects of one unique crisis. After all, it is only if we believe that populism is problematic that we regard the refugee crisis as a source of guilt: it is, after all, populism that keeps us from rescuing our brethren. Those who regard the moral crisis of Europe as a crisis of the European identity do so because it threatens the values of brotherhood without which Europe is not itself. Conversely, from the perspective of a supporter of the populist wave, the crisis is a crisis of an identity that is threatened: for the nativist, the expression "refugee crisis" refers not to a humanitarian disaster, but to the perceived threat represented by the newcomers. Let us therefore think of the crisis of Europe as neither the refugee nor the populist crisis, nor of them as two different crises. But rather, let us consider that the crisis that has Europe as its stake is unified and possesses two expressions. Both these expressions are to do with the relation that Europe entertains with non-Europe. In its relation with non-Europe, its "other" if you will, Europe is caught within the impossible alternative between indifference and guilt. If, as I suggested at the beginning, crises indicate essences, and assuming that we are indeed before a crisis of Europe, then the clue that the crisis provides is this: Europe is this that at once essentially collapses into the alternative

of indifference (populism) and guilt (for our treatment of refugees) and becomes impossible once this alternative becomes institutionalized. Here is the question that needs addressing therefore: What sort of thing is Europe so that it is rendered impossible by the irreconcilability of guilt and indifference?

Posed in this way, the question remains too abstract. Let me try to spell out more concretely what this alternative of guilt and indifference entails and whether it can be reduced to one single factor. I will consider indifference as the excess of our ability to act over our ability to care, and guilt, conversely, as the excess of our ability to care over our ability to act. After all, indifference is the refusal to respond when you are able to respond, and similarly, guilt is the feeling that one doesn't do what one knows themselves to have the duty to do.

This is not as strange as it looks; indeed, this is an intuition that has been expressed at the level of mass culture by Angela Merkel's famous "wir schaffen das" as well as by the many in Europe who took Merkel's framing of the issue as successfully capturing the stakes of the moment in the context of public discourse. Merkel's expression seems to address directly the question of the mismatch of care and action, and the context of this famous remark was saturated with a pragmatic discussion of potential and ability for action. On August 31, 2015, she declared that "the motive with which we approach these matters must be: we have already managed so much, we'll manage this." Her message was this: We have the means to act in accordance with what we care about, if only we could find the will to. "I put it simply, Germany is a strong country."³ It was, in Merkel's characteristic fashion, a precise and sharp appeal to matching care with action.⁴ The effect of her intervention was to point out that more action was possible toward achieving a fit between our care to save those drowning in the sea (an urge for solidarity that she unquestioningly attributed to the German people) and our capacity to act.

So, it seems that characterizing the refugee crisis as this that poses the question of Europe's inability to match care and action is not so far-fetched after all. When expressed by one of the most distinctively European leaders, it seems to hit the nail on the head. Europe is this that is essentially embroiled in the mismatch of care and action, and the job of a leader in Europe, like Merkel, is to restore this match. But where does this mismatch come from and why should we see it as specific to Europe? I will have to stay content to address the latter question by merely pointing out that this is a view very close to a number of tradi-

tionally accepted notions of Europe, in particular, the Nietzschean idea that there is something specifically European about (a certain kind of) nihilism. This question will establish the focus of the rest of the chapter. I will argue with reference to Johan Huizinga that the fundamental “thing” that leads Europe to the tension between care and action is a certain preexisting historical process of dismantlement of the experience of play that is specifically European.

European Nihilism

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by the mismatch of care and action in the context of the affinity of Europe with nihilism. It will allow me to support my claim that the mismatch is a phenomenon unified enough to be used to define European modernity. The key here is to establish that nihilism is at heart a fetishistic theory of care. For the nihilist, to care for X (say, human rights) is to believe that there is an object (a “fetish”) that mandates and justifies our caring for X. I call this a “fetishistic” view because it shares two key features with the fetishism described by anthropologists and psychoanalysts.⁵ The first is the metaethical view that values (which determine care worthiness) are derived from objects, and the second is the metaphysical view that some objects (i.e., fetishes) carry within them their own value, that they are self-justifying. Pietz calls these fetishes “value-objects.”⁶ This is why fetishes are contradictory objects. They are both independent from the world within which care takes place (our world), and yet they place demands upon it, and therefore depend on what takes place in this world for their satisfaction. Like a fetish, this “thing” (Nietzsche sometimes calls it “god”) is both in-itself and for-us. This fetishistic view of care worthiness, which subjects care worthiness to the objective realm, is opposed to the immanent notion of care, according to which care worthiness is constituted not by a reference to an object and its existence, but by the caring itself (You will note that in the latter case, we have a constitutive match between caring and the reasons to care). As I shall discuss below, this immanent view is best exemplified by the paradigm case of play.

The fetishistic view of care implies a web of justification that obeys a certain logic of truth: to care for X (say, human rights again) implies that we believe that Y (the fetish, say, “nature as reason”) exists, that

it mandates our caring for X, and that the function of thinking is to retrieve the truths about Y. I call this a logic of truth because it is a logic in which care about human rights (which belongs broadly to the realm of the “ought”) is justified by the truth about nature as reason (in the realm of the “is”). I should care about human rights because it is true that nature is reason. To care for human rights in this context means to believe that there is a fact about nature to the effect that human rights are to be cared for. In short, it is to regard the *meaning* and *value* of human rights as dependent on the *fact* of nature. This leads us to an important metaphysical decision, a decision about what meaning is. In this nihilistic view, meaning is this that is *retrieved* by interpretation. Because it is retrieved, it is expected that the meaning of the object of care is independent from its retrieval that succeeds it, and whose standard of success are to be found in the presumed correspondence with the meaning intrinsically contained in the thing. In other words, nihilism is premised on the idea that there is such a thing as meaning-in-itself. The meaning of X is the truth maker of an interpretation, not its *result*. Interpretation *reveals* a certain characteristic of X but—God forbid—it doesn’t perform any meaning-*attribution*. Nihilism outlaws meaning attribution and replaces it with blind objectivism. For Nietzsche indeed, nihilism is defined by the thesis that meaning is *found* rather than *made*.⁷ We can see why Nietzsche calls nihilism an excess of seriousness. It sees seriousness not as a characteristic of one’s subjective attitude, but as something about the object taken seriously. To take X (say human rights) seriously is to *believe it to be the case* that X is objectively serious, and beliefs are about facts and truths.

All of this suggests that nihilism relies on the thesis that the hermeneutic realm should be subjected to the epistemic realm. Let me explain. The hermeneutic realm deals with interpretations and meanings. The core aim of hermeneutics is understanding. The epistemic realm deals with knowledge and truth. Its core aim is knowledge. As Nietzsche indicates often,⁸ these are profoundly divergent concerns that carry with them entirely different worldviews. The hermeneutic view presupposes that there is meaning, whereas the epistemic view places this presupposition in abeyance. There is meaning only if there is something objectively real that undergirds meaning. This epistemic approach involves a displacement of the notion of meaning. It cannot be doubted however, that there is meaning in a weak sense: that some things mean something to us sometimes. This is the starting point of the hermeneutic approach: in interpretation, institution (or meaning-attribution), and

recognition (or meaning discovery) are one thing. There is some minimal experience of meaning, therefore. And the epistemic approach cannot deny this sort of meaning. If it is to question whether there is meaning at all, it must change the notion of meaning altogether, to subject it to truth requirements. It must assume that there is no meaning if there is no objective source for this meaning and disqualify even this minimal notion of meaning, by cashing it out as “the false belief that so-and-so meant something.” It only exposes itself to the easy objection to the effect that having a belief, even a false belief, about something, is already grasping this thing as meaning. Under the epistemic approach, therefore, the question becomes: Is the meaning we experience true? You will note that this involves a commitment to an objectivist notion of meaning that is momentous. Namely, it takes for granted that (1) one can be wrong about meaning, (2) that there are objective standards for the correctness of meaning, (3) that the sort of correctness appropriate to meaning is identical to the sort of correctness appropriate to truth, and in particular (4) that the binary logic whereby everything that is not true is false can be applied to the realm of meaning: that things are either meaningful or meaningless. It is easy to see how this leads to nihilism in several of the senses used by Nietzsche⁹ and the tradition that follows him. In particular, the epistemic view seems to underpin nihilism as

- the view that nothing has meaning (for indeed, nothing is meaningful enough to resist the charge of meaninglessness),
- the view that there is no meaning in life or that life is not worth living (after the death of God that is, since God stands for all fetishes),
- the view that all meaning should be abandoned as illegitimate,
- the view, which Nietzsche mischievously draws from the traditional third-man argument, that there is no meaning at all, unless we commit to fetishism. For only the fetishistic view that some objects are both value and value justifying can escape the objection to the effect that the objectivism of nihilism involves an infinite regress: if meaning can only be grounded by an external entity that is its source, but by the same token, this very entity cannot ground its own meaning, resulting in an infinite regress.

In order to measure the stake of this hostile takeover of the hermeneutic logic by the epistemic logic (Nietzsche calls this moment the “slave revolt in morality”), one could point to very concrete examples of everyday life. In our engagement with fiction for example, meaning (and one of its varieties, care) is experienced without any reference to truth. This is famously dramatized in some strands of contemporary philosophy as the so-called “paradox of the emotional response to fiction.”¹⁰ The existence of this paradox, where it is asked how we can feel real emotions about fictional characters that we know to be unreal, is directly related to the epistemic assumption that meaning cannot exist without a truth to support it. Without this premise, there would be no paradox. But this premise stands or falls with fetishism. And this is not just a matter of the phenomenon of fiction either. We find a similar structure at the heart of the phenomenon of play as a realm in which commitment, the attribution of importance, and the investment of care are entirely unrelated to any objective source of meaning, yet, unquestionable.¹¹ One could make the same argument about myth and love and several other important phenomena of everyday life. What the epistemic logic of truth does with the hermeneutic logic of meaning is that it replaces its immanent self-referentiality with the transcendent referentiality to an object. As a result, the standard for care has moved from self-grounding to objective grounding. Denouncing this shift is, broadly speaking, the project of the hermeneutic critique of modernity.

Thus, considering nihilism in the context of care allows me to tie my suggestion that Europe is defined by a mismatch of care and action to a more commonly accepted notion of Europe as nihilistic. In the canonical case of Nietzsche’s analysis of European nihilism, for example, we see nihilism as resulting from the combination of the epistemic thesis (whereby caring is only made legitimate by objectivity) and the thesis of the death of God (who stands for all possible such legitimizing objects or fetishes) (Chouraqui, 2022). One of the consequences of this combination, Nietzsche asserts, is a certain state of existential funk: The nihilistic subject is stuck before the necessity to care (imposed by the mere fact of being alive, for the will to power is Nietzsche says, care or “interest”) and the impossibility to act, for acting is no longer objectively warranted. Indeed, in the context of nihilism, indifference as well as action are prescribed at once.¹² This double bind results in either blind action or blind indifference.¹³ Nietzsche therefore moves on to observing that

nihilism produces two attitudes: “active nihilism,” which acts without care, and “passive nihilism,” which cares without acting.

Let’s sum up. So far, we have zeroed in on the idea of Europe as a mismatch between care and action. I tried to flesh out this idea with reference to European nihilism as the subjection of the hermeneutic to the epistemic. This leaves us with four questions.

1. A metaphysical question: How can we draw a unified essence of Europe from a phenomenon here described as a mismatch between two things (care and action) and there described as the subjection of one (the hermeneutic) to the other (the epistemic)? If Europe is a certain relation (of mismatch or of subjection), how can it be one thing?
2. The second is genealogical: How did this situation come about?
3. The third is axiological: What is wrong with such a mismatch?
4. Finally, we have an empirical question: Why call this mismatch Europe?

As one might expect, those four questions have one single answer. For it is to be expected in answer to 1 that the situation we now call Europe, which is best defined as a relation and not a thing, came about as the distortion of a single and unified ground; in answer to 2 that this ground itself contained the dynamic potential required for its own dismemberment; in answer to 3 that this dismemberment, although an authentic potentiality of the basic ground, constitutes a misrepresentation of it (if by “misrepresentation” we simply mean an unworkable interpretation) and therefore, in answer to 4 that there are two answers. First, that this dismemberment, because it was possible but not necessary, came about for a set of contingent reasons one may justifiably associate with the sociohistorical entity we call Europe. Second, that this dismemberment, as we shall see, is identical with the dismemberment of care and action. In short, we are looking for a certain unified ground that, in the contingent circumstances called Europe, would engage in its own self-dismemberment in such a way that this dismemberment might

correspond to the mismatch of care and action. I will argue that this basic ground is called “play.”

Europe as the Graveyard of Play

This set of questions delineates a context in which one intriguing thought from Johan Huizinga seems to find its place. Talking about the civilization of modern Europe, Huizinga writes: “In the development [of civilization] we must not think of seriousness degenerating into play or of play rising to the level of seriousness. It is rather that civilization gradually brings about a certain division between two modes of mental life which we distinguish as playfulness and seriousness respectively, but which originally formed a continuous mental medium wherein that civilization arose.”¹⁴ We, with our interest in distilling the essence of Europe, have reason to be intrigued by this thought. After all, Huizinga, a specialist of medieval Europe, who was writing in 1938, is also concerned about a certain crisis of Europe (one that bears many similarities to our own). His concern was with a crisis constituted by “a society rapidly goose-stepping into helotry.”¹⁵ Additionally, Huizinga, as a historian, seemed to be led to such abstract conclusions not because he was carried away by the bad habits of his trade (something that would be a reasonable suspicion, had he been a philosopher), but *in spite* of his discipline’s mistrust of grand conceptual constructions. Something seems to have imposed itself on him. After the cue provided by the quick analysis of the refugee crisis, let us take Huizinga’s thought as an additional clue to the definition of Europe, or at least of the very Europe that is now, once again, in crisis.

So, it looks like “the play-element” in Huizinga’s sense is a good candidate for the basic unitarian phenomenon we are seeking and therefore that the events covered by this epoch called modernity can be interpreted in terms of the internal dynamics that take place in play. But this leaves us with the question of the relations between play and the dynamic of care and action that has occupied us so far. I will try to clarify this relation by looking more closely at Huizinga’s sketch of a phenomenology of play.

What would this clue suggest? First, we note that what Huizinga calls “the play-element” is precisely that unitary and primary “mental continuum” which we are seeking. Second, that the civilizing process should be regarded as a process in which this unitary phenomenon was

broken up, and its components became extricated from each other and neatly distributed around a binary opposition. Third, that these two components should be called “puerilism”¹⁶ and seriousness. Fourth, that European history is not only the process by which Europe as we know it came about, but it is at the same time and for the same reasons the process by which the separation of puerility and seriousness became stabilized and institutionalized. Huizinga gives examples of this institutionalization in war, in the arts, and in politics among other domains of culture. For these fields and others, the civilizing process cum-dismemberment of play made them less and less structured by rules (which accommodate playfulness alongside seriousness) and more and more by references to objective truth and goodness (which demands that seriousness dominate playfulness).

Why Is Play Primary?

We must begin by asking what allows Huizinga to speak of play as a unity of opposites in the first place. Huizinga’s hypothesis relies on the distinction between the “play-element” and “playfulness”¹⁷ (he also says “puerilism”).¹⁸

According to our definition of play, puerilism [*puerilisme*] is to be distinguished from playfulness. A child playing is not puerile in the pejorative sense we mean here. And if our modern puerilism were genuine play we ought to see civilization returning to the great archaic forms of recreation where ritual, style and dignity are in perfect unison. The spectacle of a society rapidly goose-stepping into helotry is, for some, the dawn of the millennium. We believe them to be in error.¹⁹

The play-element cannot be reduced to “puerilism” because play cannot take place in the spirit of puerilism alone. This is illustrated by Huizinga’s analysis of the spoilsport. The spoilsport is a player who is too aware that the game is *only* a game. They, for this reason, cease to play and undermine the game for others and themselves. Too much playfulness, Huizinga concludes, prevents play from taking place. Proper play therefore *matches* puerilism with seriousness: a certain commitment to the game, which limits and organizes puerilism (sometimes this is figured by rules,

but more generally, we should think of any behavior that allows the game to go on). Of course, the element of seriousness (*Ernst*) alone is insufficient too, because if not supplemented by the spirit of playfulness, it will—just like its opposite, the spoilsport—refuse to engage in play at all until a good justification for it is proposed. Play can die two deaths: from too much playfulness or too much seriousness equally.

This suggests three things. First, play proper is best understood without reference to any dichotomy between seriousness and frivolity. Second, in play, we experience restricted seriousness and restricted playfulness (they are restricted by each other). Third, Huizinga makes an extra move: Seriousness and playfulness as they appear in play, that is, as restricted by each other, are not *a certain kind* of seriousness and playfulness or *a certain kind* of experience of play or of seriousness. They are *the paradigm* and genealogical archetype for all subsequent forms of playfulness and seriousness. Play is a basic element, and it cannot be reduced to any other element. This genealogical precedence of seriousness as we encounter it in play over seriousness as we encounter it in our modern, nihilistic times, is made explicit by Huizinga: “You can deny seriousness but not play.”²⁰ There are expressions in Huizinga that make the same point about puerility, although he takes the latter point to be more self-evident. A final point therefore is that seriousness unrestricted by puerilism is a distortion of its own source, which is the kind of seriousness that we find in play. There lies Huizinga’s basic analysis of modern fetishism, one that is strikingly parallel to Nietzsche’s. The spirit of seriousness involves a category mistake because it seeks to ground seriousness into an objective fact whereas seriousness can only ever come from a decision to play which eschews the question of justification. Playing is neither justified nor unjustified, it precedes the question of justification.

Why Is Play Self-Dismantling?

If play is a unitary and primary “ground,” we must assume that it grounds something. When we experience play, we experience this unity of puerility and seriousness, but we also experience seriousness and puerility as potentially distinguishable. There is, according to Huizinga, a spontaneous dynamic at work within the element of play, and this dynamic can be considered as the initial intimation of their potential separation. Indeed, despite its primary unity, any instance of play involves a certain precon-

ceptual awareness of the distribution of seriousness and playfulness. Play studies are divided between those who hold that the notion of rules is essential to that of play and those who reserve rules for a certain kind of games. If you are among the first, it will be easy to see how this distribution arises from within the experience of play. If play always has rules, these rules are precisely rules of division. They always at least serve to distinguish between the play world and the “real” world, and it is visible in this context that what is serious in play (for example “winning”) is frivolous when considered from outside the game. The rules are to be taken seriously from the point of view of the game, playfully from the point of view of the nongame. This is the function of Huizinga’s famous analysis of the magic circle, which is “magical” because it provides a unity of opposites, because it separates and maintains the continuity between the frivolous and the serious. Indeed, this notion of the magic circle (taken in its most minimal sense of the interface between play and nonplay) should accommodate even those play scholars who deny that all play involves rules and suffices to make the point at hand, that play always suggests its own separateness from the real world. In short, the play element that is the unity of frivolity and seriousness includes within itself the potential of leading into what it isn’t: namely, the opposition of seriousness and playfulness. This division, in turn, is best understood as a distribution of the puerile and the serious along neat lines.

It is play therefore that is the genealogical source of the experiences of seriousness and playfulness. In the case of seriousness in particular, the insight that seriousness is born in play pushes in favor of the hermeneutic model and against the fetishistic model described above. It suggests that seriousness is a function of engagement, not of belief. It misunderstands itself by taking itself to be referring to a meaningless objective truth (meaningless because objective). The serious person forgets that seriousness is always undermined by its genealogical association with play, and the puerile forgets that nothing is fully puerile since there is no objective standard according to which puerility fails to be serious enough. Both overseriousness and puerility forget that our attitude is not to be indexed on any transcendent ground.

Why Does the Division Lead into Fetishism?

Here is a plausible reconstruction of Huizinga’s intuition: Pure seriousness and pure frivolity (as we find them rampant in the streets of Europe

today) are only pure because they both refer, in opposite ways, to an objective ground of justification. Certainly, seriousness is an appropriate response if the state of affairs in and of itself demands seriousness (what we called above fetishism). On the same grounds, nihilistic puerilism is an appropriate response when such a ground is lacking. You will note that both attitudes are premised on the same fetishism: the view that what justifies care is something objective. This is for similar reasons, for example, that Nietzsche regards Christianity as a nihilistic religion. Even the faithful are nihilists because they allow the value of the objects of their care to depend on a contingent fact: the existence of an external entity such as God. Their ability to care is therefore dependent on their ability to believe. The fact that Christians are not nihilists in the weaker sense (namely, in the sense that they happen to believe there is no such a guarantee of being) does not exempt them from the charge of deeper nihilism. Nietzsche's complaint is that fetishism makes the meaning of life much more vulnerable to the vagaries of history and knowledge than is necessary. Both puerilism and seriousness, therefore, are premised on fetishism. What is seriousness without play? The belief that seriousness is a feature of things (eventually of the thing that gives other things value). What is frivolity without seriousness? The life of the spoilsport, the collapse of meaning, indifference and a sort of *Clockwork Orange* frivolity.

Modernity as Derived from, Structured by, and Opposing Play

This leads us to the vision of European modernity put forward by Huizinga: modernity is the age in which the false separation of playfulness and seriousness has been consummated institutionally. It is an age where "the play-element in culture" has led to its own undoing; puerility and seriousness have lost their grip on each other, and play is dead by dismemberment. The result is unrestricted frivolity and unrestricted seriousness, both destructive. In addition, Huizinga gives some indications (expanded in his working notes) of the fact that he takes the malfunction of totalitarianism as a logical consequence of this dismemberment. Nazism, he declares, is to be defined as overseriousness (because of its romantic appeal to the race and a world mission) and overfrivolity (as is well known, Arendt will go on to define Nazi evil

as “thoughtlessness”²¹), and only robust play can save us from it. What we find instead is frivolity: Munich (recall that Huizinga is writing in 1938). The structural wrongness of totalitarianism is therefore exposed as the result of an ontological fallacy: the belief that seriousness can exist without its opposite, that it can exist purely.

We now have a candidate for a process of dismemberment that we have reason to associate with Europe. But our earlier analysis of the refugee crisis included a further requirement: The dismemberment in question was to be separating care from action. In what sense can we say that the relations of care and action are at stake in the relations of seriousness and frivolity?

Let us return to the earlier point about the unified and primary character of the phenomenon of play. There, two points were made. The first, genealogical one, says that play teaches us what seriousness is. It is the genealogical precondition of the spirit of seriousness (now gone pathological in fetishism). It is also visible by contrast to the attitude of the spoilsport (who doesn’t care because they do not believe the game to be serious enough) that what Huizinga regards as seriousness amounts to, or at least includes, what we have called “care” above. Play is the genealogical source of care. The second point, which relates to the analysis of dismemberment, suggests that play is defined as an exact match between care and action. After all, as I mentioned above, play can die one of two deaths: either through overseriousness or through puerility. But what does “dying” mean for play? Simply this, that no playing takes place. Play is identical with the match between care and action, and its dismemberment amounts exactly to the estrangement of care and action that, as I suggested hypothetically, defines Europe. In other words, with the death of play, those of us who remain active lose their ability for restraint and those of us who are passive lose their ability for action.

In terms of the four questions that we were left with at the end of the previous section, this suggests the following answers:

To question 1—If Europe is a certain relation, how can it be one thing?—we can answer that there are things, like play, that although a primary and unified ground, contain within themselves the dynamic of their own division. Call it a dialectic movement.

To question 2 —How did this situation come about? —we can answer that Huizinga’s analysis of play suggests that play is the genealogical source of both our sense of seriousness and our sense of frivolity. In other words, if nihilism is precisely, as I argued above, the experience

of the alternative between overseriousness and meaninglessness, its basic foundational cognitivist thesis is refuted by the genealogical argument. Seriousness always refers to play, it is the experience of play and nothing else which teaches us what seriousness is.

To question 3 —What is wrong with such a mismatch? —we can consequently answer that it relies on a previous fallacy: the illusion that seriousness can retain any meaning without its embedding in play. Above, I called this view “fetishism.” The second fallacy, which involves the separate treatment of care and action, is a function of the previous, which involves the dismemberment of the unitarian ground of play. For if Huizinga is correct in regarding play as the foundational source of meaning, then it is certain that care is to emerge from within the act of play and only from there. In short, to act is to play, and to care is to play, and in play, care and action are always matched. The engagement with play involves by definition the match between care and action. Until the separation comes about and play dies by dismemberment.

To question 4—Why call this mismatch Europe? —I can only gesture at the analysis of the crisis of Europe I present in section 1 as well as the rest of Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and as his *Waning of the Middle Ages*, which trace the circumstances of Western culture upon which their connection with the dismemberment of play is easy to reconstruct. This, I admit, constitutes only half of an adequate answer to this question, but I would point out that this is the important half. For it is enough to reduce the question to a mere problem of history, and one that we have reason to expect will bear fruit.

Conclusion

This leaves us with not one, but three formulations of the essence of Europe, and I need to put a bit of order into all of this. It is not a matter of reducing the three formulations of Europe to one, but rather to regard them as three different facets that have more or less relevance to different contexts. At the surface level, we have Europe as a mismatch of care and action, and the European soul caught between guilt and indifference. This, however, only tells us of our current condition. It doesn’t address the question of whether this mismatch is profound enough to be *essential*. The second formulation, of Europe as nihilistic fetishism, makes a step in this direction mostly because it connects the first formulation

to a more generally accepted notion of Europe as nihilism. According to fetishism, care is compelled to justify itself in objective terms. In this context, play can never justify care, and fetishism outlaws play. In other words, fetishism doesn't merely condition the dismantlement of play, but it necessitates it. Yet, this too leaves a question unanswered: Where does such fetishism come from? In order to address this question, we need to suppose the existence of a dynamic principle as a condition for this fetishistic drift. This is the principle Huizinga calls "the play-element": play is the necessary condition of fetishism for two reasons. First, it teaches us about seriousness, and second, it induces from within itself the distinction of seriousness and frivolity. In this context, I argue that Europe should be defined as the impossibility of play and, therefore, the European soul as the soul that oscillates between overseriousness and frivolity. I argue that this is exactly what the current crisis of Europe illustrates, and that consequently, we may take seriously the hypothesis that this crisis is indeed essential, and that therefore, the best definition of Europe is as the graveyard of play.

Notes

1. Bhambra, "The Current Crisis of Europe."
2. Castan Pinos, "Building Fortress Europe?"
3. The relevant parts of the speech make an explicit connection between the refugee crisis and the essence of Europe:

Let me say this once more: Germany is a strong country. The approach that we must take to these affairs is this: we have already managed so much—We'll manage this! We'll manage this and the obstacles in our way will be overcome and will be worked out. The federal government will do everything in its power, together with the regions and the municipalities, to achieve this. [. . .] There is also the European dimension. And here I think that we must clearly say: Europe as a whole must take action. The states must take responsibility for sharing the refugees seeking asylum. The universal rights of the citizen are indissociably connected to Europe and its history. They are one of the basic impulses of the European Union. If Europe fails on the issue of refugees, then this connection between Europe and universal rights will be broken. It will be destroyed, and Europe will no longer be the Europe we envision, it will no longer live up to the basic myth we are pursuing.

Ich sage ganz einfach: Deutschland ist ein starkes Land. Das Motiv, mit dem wir an diese Dinge herangehen, muss sein: Wir haben so vieles geschafft—wir schaffen das! Wir schaffen das, und dort, wo uns etwas im Wege steht, muss es überwunden werden, muss daran gearbeitet werden. Der Bund wird alles in seiner Macht Stehende tun—zusammen mit den Ländern, zusammen mit den Kommunen –, um genau das durchzusetzen [. . .] Es gibt dann die europäische Dimension, und hier glaube ich, dass wir schon sagen dürfen: Europa als Ganzes muss sich bewegen. Die Staaten müssen die Verantwortung für asylbegehrende Flüchtlinge teilen. Die universellen Bürgerrechte waren bislang eng mit Europa und seiner Geschichte verbunden. Das ist einer der Gründungsimpulse der Europäischen Union. Versagt Europa in der Flüchtlingsfrage, geht diese enge Bindung mit den universellen Bürgerrechten kaputt. Sie wird zerstört, und es wird nicht das Europa sein, das wir uns vorstellen, und nicht das Europa sein, das wir als Gründungsmythos auch heute weiterentwickeln müssen.

For the full transcript of the speech of August 31, 2015, see <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonzferenzen/sommerpressekonzferenz-von-bundeskonzlerin-merkel-848300>.

4. Holzberg, “Wir schaffen das.”
5. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I.”
6. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish IIIa,” 109.
7. Chouraqui, “The Cognitivist Thesis of Nihilism.”
8. Chouraqui, “The Cognitivist Thesis of Nihilism.”
9. Paul van Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, provides the most expert and comprehensive coverage of the many senses of nihilism in Nietzsche.
10. Radford, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?”; Levinson, “Emotion in Response to Art.”
11. Bogost, *Play Anything*.
12. Chouraqui, “The Duty of Violence.”
13. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Rechtsphilosophie*, preface, section 5, and appendix.
14. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 111.
15. Huizinga, 207.
16. Huizinga, 207.
17. Huizinga, 111.
18. Huizinga, 207–10.
19. Huizinga, 207.
20. Huizinga, 3.
21. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*.

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