

Gunnar Pettersson: HOLY EUROPE (20 min talk for R3)

From the outer reaches of the political imagination comes a conspiracy theory. It claims that not only the Treaty of Maastricht but European union as a whole are masterminded by the Freemasons. The theory goes, roughly, like this.

From the late 18th century onwards European Freemasonry has been split into two main, rival currents: the English and the French. The English tradition, found mainly in the Protestant northern parts of Europe, is based on religious faith and largely preoccupied with the minutiae of symbols and rites. Broadly speaking a non-political fraternity, this is Freemasonry as a lubricant in the establishment machinery. The French tradition, the so-called Grand Lodge of the Orient, is found mainly in the Latin parts of Europe, most notoriously in the Italian P2 lodge. This is a highly politicized form of Freemasonry: republican, secular, even anti-clerical. If anything rather impatient with obscure ceremonies, the Grand Orient has in the past attracted revolutionaries, atheists - and the odd anarchist.

Now, with their centuries-old structure of semi-autonomous lodges under a Grand Mastership, Freemasons can be said to have invented the concept of federalism - and it's been particularly important to the Grand Orient ever since its inception. It was put into nation-shaping practice in the founding of the United States of America where a large part of the main players were Masons with close ties to their French brethren.

Now we move briskly on to the period immediately after the Second World War. Among the many voices heard arguing for some form of European Federation there was, soft but insistent, the collective voice of the powerful French Masonic establishment. In this context, the theory provides a neat answer to the old conundrum why it was that Britain was so reluctant, in the immediate post-war years, to exploit its enormous prestige on the Continent and seize the initiative in the building of the European community. The truth can now be revealed: it wasn't in fact reluctance, it was plain defeat. In a Europe which demanded vision and leadership the Grand Orient, who for 150 turbulent years of French history had refined the art of corridor politics, simply won a walk-over victory over the timid political amateurs of the English Masonic establishment.

So complete was their victory that, in 1961, a triumphant Grand Orient convened an historical meeting in Strasbourg with brother lodges from eleven European countries. They issued the Strasbourg Declaration in which they urged

European Masons to unite in one federal Grand Lodge since, as they almost correctly predicted, "European union will be a reality within 30 years". When, in 1964, the English tried to re-enter the fray Charles de Gaulle, who was himself a Mason, was able to reply with a rather gloating "Non". Not until a decade later was battle joined again.

Thus, from the Coal & Steel Union to the Single European Market and beyond, the Franco-English tensions over Europe stand revealed as a struggle for supremacy between two Masonic factions: the federalist French, the natural politickers, and the nationalist English, unwilling actors on the grander political stage. And nowhere is that conflict spelt out more clearly than in the Maastricht Treaty and its troubled journey towards ratification.

That's, at least, how the conspiracy theory would have it.

It was, of course, entirely predictable that the Freemasons would sooner or later be identified as the hidden, supra-national force behind the European project. The individual facts that make up the theory are true enough: the problem is the illusion of coherence you get when you put them in a certain sequence. But as with other conspiracy theories, this one is less interesting for what it claims than for what it signifies, not only as regards the political imagination, but the reality too.

The prospect of a powerful united Europe is the one reality which today fires that imagination more intensely than any other. In particular with the sudden collapse of the atheistic states in Eastern Europe, and the turmoil that's resulted from it, it's inevitable that some will begin to see the creation of a European superstate as representing a larger, more mysterious scheme.

There are several features of European union that seem to invite occult interpretations. It's not just that the events now unfolding are of truly epoch-making moment for the future of the whole continent, and perhaps the world. It's also that the process towards union has so far rested - and been perceived to rest - in the hands of a remote and anonymous brotherhood of technocrats meeting in conclave. Added to that, the process has been couched in a Mandarin language, a Protocolese, of such hermetic impenetrability that the press and broadcasting media have recently taken to publishing exegeses of the sacred texts.

Following the Danish and French referenda the initiates into the European mysteries have of course promised more openness and accountability - but more as an ecumenical afterthought than as part of the evolved liturgy. The hasty defensiveness with which these assurances have come is curiously reminiscent of the self-conscious manner in which Freemasons sometimes open their doors to the

public in order to show that all they have to hide is merely a set of embroidered pinnies and a portentous way of addressing one another.

It has to be said, though, that occult viewpoints are held not only by lay people on the outside of the process. When I visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg not long ago I was struck by the fact that many parliamentarians and functionaries themselves, at least in private conversations, like to describe Strasbourg as full of people with ulterior motives, divided loyalties, hidden agendas and networks of influence behind them. The EC was frequently talked of as a platform, or a ramp: not only for the usual sinister-sounding groups like Freemasons, Opus Dei, Socialist interventionists and multinational corporations - but rather harmless ones, too, like old-school-tie rackets and so on. Even, as someone pointed out to me, the fact that a suspiciously large number of the Parliament's ushers and chauffeurs are Sicilian, for some mysterious reason. In Strasbourg, it seemed, little or nothing is what it appears to be.

Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the Parliament is already organized in trans-national political blocks - Socialists, Christian Democrats and so on. As a consequence, formal and informal networking across conventional boundaries - territorial or otherwise - is something that comes naturally not only to European parliamentarians but to the EC as a whole.

The process towards union has after all gone far beyond the easily recognizable give-and-take between what we used to think of as sovereign nation-states. The engine of the process today is the interplay between a multitude of trans-national networks - bureaucratic, commercial, policiary, ideological, denominational - that aren't always easily discernible, indeed often seem as anonymous as monastic orders. This, surely, is one of the most important elements in that scepticism tinged with fear that many people feel towards European union. With the role of the nation-states increasingly played out and the lack of democratic control a fact of life for the foreseeable future, there is a perceived and rather mysterious vacuum at what ought to be "the top": who does - and more importantly, who will - rule the European monolith?

It's a vacuum the conspiracy theorists can't wait to fill. It was perhaps equally predictable that Freemasonry's traditional, supra-national rival, the Catholic Church, should also be seen lurking in the background. In fact, in an interesting parallel to the Masonic theory, it has been argued that the British reluctance towards post-war European union has its roots in the conviction, long entrenched in Britain's Protestant

political culture, that the EC is the exclusive space in which Roman Catholic political ambitions are acted out.

If that argument has any validity, it is all the more ironic that whereas federalism could be said to be a Masonic concept, the preferred alternative among British Eurosceptics - subsidiarity - is a term borrowed from the Catholic Church itself. Introduced by Pope Pius XI in the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, subsidiarity is a central concept in Roman Catholic social philosophy. Its basic principle is that in the secular organization of society, precedence is taken by local bodies. Social problems should, as far as is practicable, be dealt with by the smallest social units: the local community, the congregation, and in particular the family.

Given the history of the European project, it's self-evident that Catholics, and Catholic political parties, have played an instrumental role in its realization. It's another matter entirely whether Roman Catholicism is therefore the one ideology that underpins it. What one might argue is that, viewed strictly as political cultures, Catholicism and Protestantism represent the two most important - and conflicting - systems of interpretation in the European debate.

It's been suggested that this is what lies at the root of the frequent arguments over matters of scriptural exegesis. Not least in the Treaty of Maastricht: the quarrel over the inclusion of the word "federalism" is a case in point. Only a Protestant political culture could show such an obsession with Scripture, with the Word, as an unequivocal guide to one's subsequent and consequent actions. A Catholic political culture regards the relationship between word and deed as far more provisional and relaxed. The Word needn't represent more than helpful advice in largely symbolic form, and the Deed doesn't necessarily follow from it with the moral compunction of Biblical literalism.

The fear of Roman Catholic domination in Europe has a related, darker aspect too - and Biblical literalism provides the setting for it. This is the idea that European union is the platform upon which the world will soon see the arrival of the Anti-Christ, whose rule briefly precedes the Second Coming. Although this is the most bizarre theory to have emerged it's also the one that's probably had the greatest impact on public debates about Europe. The idea has taken root in particular among Scandinavian charismatic churches - the Pentecostals, especially. And the growing political influence of revivalist religion in the Nordic sphere should by no means be underestimated. They make up, if not the mainstream, then certainly a very important tributary within the Christian political parties in Scandinavia. This is particularly so in Finland and Norway, where today's public debates about proposed

EC membership are quite significantly coloured by these strange fears.

The primary sources here are of course the Bible's Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelations. I shan't attempt to present a coherent case on behalf of this theory, because it's practically impossible to locate one, but there are a couple of features worth mentioning. One is the anti-Catholic theme that runs, spoken or unspoken, through the revivalist reading of the prophecy. In the wider, and longer, perspective of the Protestant North set to join the Community in the next few years, it's not at all unlikely that anti-Catholic phobias in one form or another will enter the mainstream of the debate too. Another aspect of the prophecy is what is seen as the evil of economic protectionism, the setting up of trade barriers around the European community. The troubled course of the recent GATT negotiations has only added grist to the millenarianism. It all chimes very well with the prophecy contained in Revelations 13:17: "And that no man might buy or sell, save that he had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name".

The number - six hundred threescore and six - is perhaps the surest sign that the ground is now being prepared for the battle to come. Computers, and the increasingly totalitarian grip they have on our lives, are the Beast's main tool. Through them the number has been infiltrated into not only bar codes and credit cards, but above all the proposed European citizens' registration numbers, said to consist of three units of six digits each.

That a theory like this could gain currency in an otherwise perfectly rational political debate might simply be a result of tolerance laced with cynicism: it's rarely worth the political while to mock the sincerely held faith of people who also have the vote. Besides, one should always bear in mind Flann O'Brien's advice to agnostics never to blaspheme: if there isn't a God it's pointless, and if there is one it's dangerous. However, cynical tolerance can't satisfactorily explain the emergence, generally, of all these extraordinary fears and paranoidias about the occult forces at work in Strasbourg and Brussels.

The conventional explanation would be to see them strictly functionally, as a form of defence mechanism against the onslaught of rapid historical change, or as explanatory myths in an inexplicably complicated world - particularly among those in whom hard-won ignorance has a tendency to flip over into apocalyptic hysteria. It's worth re-emphasizing here what Marxists used to call "the right historical conjuncture" that exists today. The abrupt downfall of Godless Communism seemed to have the all the hallmarks of a prophecy fulfilled. The rapid approach of the Millennium provides the occasion for an awful lot of old chestnuts coming home

to roast on the eternal fires...

But the functional explanation would only really do if these phenomena were limited to the Pentecostalist fringe, or anti-Catholic bigots, or the subculture that sees the hand of Freemasonry in history's every twist and turn. Or even just limited to the alienated and uninformed generality, for whom the political and historical processes have become too remote to have anything but mythological significance.

It's clear that these ideas are anything but disconnected from the main current; they can't be dismissed as a kind of cry for help from the terminally confused and slightly detached. Irrationalism permeates political cultures throughout the world. Obscurantism, occultism and demonology in various forms remain part of the vocabulary of politics and power - in particular when political power is embarked on a project of a pronounced grandeur.

Present-day Europe is certainly no exception. Roman Catholic politicians have explained the rise of Gorbachov and the fall of Communism with the fact that Pope John Paul decided, in 1981, to consecrate Russia to the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary. Protestant politicians, some of them not too far from our own shores, claim that the Beast of Revelations has already usurped the throne of St Peter. Otto von Habsburg, MEP and veteran pan-Europeanist has spoken of the return of Charlemagne and the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire. And, of course, a not insignificant section of the European political élite regularly roll up their trouser-legs and pledge devotion to Hiram Abiff, the builder of King Solomon's temple. You don't have to be in the dark to believe in the forces of darkness.

I'm not sure that there is a clear-cut explanation for these occult interpretations of European union. Or indeed that there ought to be. The origins and growth of mystical notions are more often than not as mysterious as the notions themselves. However, I do think there are a number of key elements in them that may make up an explanation.

The first and very striking thing is that, seen strictly as historical images, all of these notions share with many others today an iconography that seems to have been transposed wholesale from pre-Enlightenment Europe. There is a strange sense of collective déjà-vu about these and other recent developments. We're quite simply living through the medievalization of late 20th century Europe. Here are the images of a civilization threatened by sinister forces, a Church Militant, the Harlot of Rome, secret quasi-religious brotherhoods, Protestant extremism, millenarianism and fear of the apocalypse. All these images are, in turn, segments of

an even larger contemporary tapestry that also depicts the threat of militant Islam, the fear of world-wide epidemics and natural catastrophes, the re-emergence of powerful city-states, and the beginnings of vast population movements across a continent that is turning increasingly schismatic and vengeful.

Europe entering a new Middle Age is an idea increasingly taken up by writers and academics throughout the Continent. So far it's little more than a kind of "historical game" played with the Middle Ages as a strictly metaphorical stake. It remains to be discovered to what extent these compelling medieval images really are nothing but history's caprice, the *deja-vu's* electrical blip in the collective memory. At what point does the metaphor transform into reality? It could be argued, and with some justification, that a medieval reality is already here, and that it is first and foremost a structural presence: in the architecture of walled cities and ethnic/tribal thought patterns, in the changing nature of warfare and the luminosities of rapturous faith.

Above all it relates to the structure of the European past. The idea has begun to gain ground that Europe is now closing an historical parenthesis. For example, many Russian and Eastern European commentators have proposed that Communism was a kind of interruption to the authentic, organic flow of human history and social organization. Some go further back in time - and Vaclav Havel is probably the best-known among them - by suggesting that the social and political project set out with the Enlightenment was a kind of costly mistake, a side-track, a barren, inhuman and wasteful historical episode that is now stumbling, out of breath, towards its inevitable closing bracket. Instead, the main flow of the narrative is being taken up again. Emerging from the ideological ruins of the autocracy of blind reason is a vigorous, spiritually re-awakened Europe with a new sense of belonging which is at once global and local, and essentially religious.

A degree of caution is needed here. At the core of this "parenthetical" view of history is a profound, conceptual violence. It implies that history can be a waste of time; that certain periods of it can be, as it were, gangrenous and only put right by messy, brutal surgery. And if periods of history are a waste of time so, by implication, are its inhabitants, along with their futile aspirations and desires - like liberty, fraternity and equality. There are distinct anti-democratic overtones, not only here but in the New Medievalism generally. Whether Masons, Catholics or the Anti-Christ be the secret movers behind contemporary events, these conspiracy theories suggest - and do so with a certain eagerness - that history, politics, the future itself are now out of our hands.

There are two dangers with these theories. One is that they might be true. The other is that they might be made to become true. It's in the nature of conspiracy theories that they're always waiting impatiently for their imminent corroboration. The temptation is always to help them along a little, because the idea of fulfilment - whether of hopes or fears - exerts a strong and sometimes irresistible attraction on the human mind. It's not so much the stories themselves; it's the way you tell them. They're really a form of Virtual Reality in which the computer game-player, helmeted and wired-up, sees all his fantasies triumphantly realized. All that the rest of us can see is a body flailing helplessly against the ghosts of the historical program.

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