

# “Phoney Europe” from Le Monde (24 September 1949)


**Caption:** On 24 September 1949, in an article published in the French daily newspaper Le Monde, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber speculates on the way in which Europe is being created in economic and political terms.

**Source:** Le Monde. 24.09.1949. Paris. "La drôle d'Europe", auteur:Servan Schreiber, Jean-Jacques.

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## ‘Phoney Europe’

By Jean-Jacques Servan Schreiber

Europe is still in the news, even a little more so since the delegates to the first session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg returned home, satisfied. It would be easy enough to view this satisfaction against the current situation: more than ever, national positions on financial measures and strategic plans are at odds. But, to be fair, nobody was expecting a miracle from Strasbourg, and it is still too early to be able to judge on results. So, for those who have to be overwhelmed by an event (in this instance the collapse of the European social structure) before they notice it, there is still plenty of hope. Luckily, the rest of us can rely on a historical criterion which is always to be detected a little in advance of the potential accident: which way are the people who govern us looking, forwards or backwards?

In Strasbourg, without the shadow of a doubt, backwards. So much is obvious. Just as, 10 years ago, the French army was preparing meticulously to fight a 1914-style war and Pétain invited us from the billboards to revisit the Age of Chivalry, so, today, our European parliamentarians have undertaken a methodical return to centuries past. Having first invoked the ‘spirit of Robespierre’ and the ‘energy of Danton’, they moved on in their deliberations to ‘the search for a new Mirabeau’, the President of the Assembly closing the debate with a call for ‘daring, more daring, and more daring still’.\* While such rhetoric is not harmful in itself, the Assembly’s decisions — and this is what is serious — were taken in the same spirit.

On the political front, the proposal is to build Europe, like France in 1789, around a ‘Declaration of Human Rights’. The analogy is unwarranted. The task, a hundred and 50 years ago, was to impose a framework and constraints on the supreme power in a hierarchical society. The Declaration of Rights was an effective instrument for the attainment of a specific objective. What meaning does it have today? Today’s fundamentally different political structure is an unstable equilibrium between social groups, each holding a share of economic power and each looking for a monopoly over political power, the better to destroy its rival.

For radical socialism, now in power, solemnly to declare, like Louis XVI, that ‘the guillotine is a thing of the past’ is just too lightweight. Faced with a fast-moving social situation, one option — reform — is to strive for a new equilibrium; another — police action — is to stop it dead. A third line, that of refusing to entertain reform while apparently rejecting police control, simply doesn’t make sense. ‘Homo strasburgensis’ is a pure invention; let’s ask the Communists to be nice enough to go along with it.

On the economic front, too, illusion is the order of the day, with the same obsession for historical precedent. To turn Europe into an enormous economic machine, a model of productivity and efficiency, the Assembly has recommended following the example of the United States, by which it means creating a vast zone of activity by breaking down national barriers, freeing economic exchange and leaving the laws of nature to establish a healthy balance. Only the example offered is the America of the Civil War. The model proposed is that of a more or less empty vessel in which the molecules present are left to develop freely, with only the best coming through. The situation in present-day Europe is, of course, quite the opposite. The economic recipient is so full of cells, each squeezed by its neighbours, that no individual cell can develop to the full. To assert that, henceforth, they will be free to grow is, in effect, to say nothing at all. Granting freedom is not what this is about; it is about choosing, pruning, eliminating, which is quite the opposite.

It should be added that, a century ago, to encourage fast industrial growth, America began by erecting barriers around itself until its level of activity matched that of its external environment. Present-day Europe is being taken in the opposite direction: it is looking to expand its internal potential while opening up substantially to the United States. So the historical analogy is more than just misguided, it is deliberately misleading. It is necessarily a mask, and the uncertainty that it fosters is favoured out of sheer defeatism.

Such, then, is the outcome of the first meeting of Europe’s parliamentarians. From all sides, we hear that it is satisfactory. But let us not be misled: the outlook is grim indeed. When the leaders of a human group begin by finding it acceptable for the existing state of affairs to persist by sheer internal inertia, and when they hold that the recipes which prevailed in a brilliant but superseded past could realistically serve as a guide for

the future, disaster is not far off.

The problem with disasters is, of course, that they do not come about gradually; they can be denied right up to the very moment when they blow up in your face. As matters stand today, Europe looks rather peaceful to the observer. If, tomorrow, the fake equilibrium which external aid is managing to sustain artificially were suddenly to lose that support (which is looking increasingly likely), things would go into freefall.

General Gamelin anaesthetised the public spirit and masked the fundamental unreadiness to fight a war by playing at trench warfare in Warndt forest. Our parliamentarians at Strasbourg are playing at being lawyers from 1789 and liberals from the 19th century. 'Phoney Europe', too, if it lasts.

Jean-Jacques Servan Schreiber

\* Translator's note: quotation from Danton.