

# Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe

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**ABSTRACT:** In the early 1930s, Julien Benda provided one of the most uncompromising visions for a united Europe. In line with his rationalist universalism, Benda sought a continent that was cleansed of passion and particularism, and called on European intellectuals to act as a rationalist vanguard in constructing such a Europe. However, Benda fatefully wavered between polity-building strategies of reshaping and redirection. For the most part, Benda seemed to demand nothing less than a comprehensive reshaping of the moral and political psychology of European citizens. However, his universalism faltered frequently, and he conceived of Europe rather as a large nation, in which the 'passion for reason' would come to dominate other passions. Such ambiguities – and failures to draw a clear line between normative ideals and the pragmatics of polity-building – persist in many present debates on European unification.

**KEY WORDS:** *Julien Benda, European integration, intellectuals, nation-building, universalism*

Only a misanthrope could regard European culture as the universal condition of our species. (Johann Gottfried Herder)

Au vrai, j'aime moins la raison que la passion de la raison. (Julien Benda)

Julien Benda remains much-quoted and little-read. The famous title of the French thinker's book *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* is almost inevitably invoked in discussions of intellectual engagement; but by and large Benda's actual ideas are no longer studied. Michael Walzer could still claim in the 1980s that *La Trahison des clercs* 'remains the best single statement of the critical intellectual's creed and the most vivid account of the temptations and dangers of intellectual politics'.<sup>1</sup> Yet few seem to feel the need any longer to consult this exemplary 'creed'.

Benda is hard to classify politically; some have even, paradoxically, called him a 'reactionary of the Left'. In the 1920s, he became best known for his advocacy of the intellectual as a defender of universalist values; he directed his ire against nationalist right-wingers and communists for betraying universal ideals in favour of the particular interests of nation or class. In 1933 he published a now almost forgotten pamphlet entitled *An Address to the European Nation*. At less than 120

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pages, Benda's *Address* amounted to a complete manual for supranational polity-building; but it also presented one of the most stringent and uncompromising visions of the moral and psychological preconditions for European unity. I wish to re-examine Benda's thoughts on Europe, because his arguments have lost none of their basic force; the stark choices Benda presented, no less than the confusions he was grappling with, are still with us – whether in Jürgen Habermas's recent call for a united Europe embodying certain civilization ideals or Pierre Bourdieu's longing for a 'more universalist Europe'. However, before presenting Benda's thoughts on a united Europe, I should like to say a few more words about Benda the man – and the reasons why he has so much fallen out of favour.

### **An Homme Sans Cœur?**

Benda certainly has had the misfortune of unsympathetic – to say the least – biographers and commentators. They have chided him for his lack of originality, although one might say that he merely remained faithful to his own idea that a true universalist would never say anything original. Benda's critics have also pointed to the rather embarrassing fact that every single book by a man who called upon fellow intellectuals to remain above human emotion turned out to be an intensely personal polemic. Even worse, Benda was a 'polemicist of bad faith' who wilfully distorted the positions of his opponents.<sup>2</sup> As his first major biographer put it, 'his hatred gave him his books' – and Benda, who once wrote that *la haine donne du génie*, might well have agreed.<sup>3</sup>

The very same hatred seems to have prevented the 'idéologue passionné' from leaving a structured intellectual legacy. At first sight a caricature of the French Cartesian philosopher, Benda had a distinct 'taste for the rectangular, the homogeneous, the certain'. But this supposed 'second-rank figure' was in fact incapable of building any system; while continuously professing 'rationalism', Benda's approach to politics was in fact psychological (and emotional) through and through.<sup>4</sup> An essayist and *moraliste* by nature, he almost seemed like a person transported into the 20th century from the time of Montaigne and the French moralists. A few brilliant moralist fragments – often vented in anger, it seems – have to be retrieved from his many, arguably too many, writings.

Yet the 'foremost theorist of the clerkly life in our time' has also been charged with 'congenital coldness' and even with being an accomplished misanthrope.<sup>5</sup> He is said not only to have imposed impossible standards of moral rectitude on his contemporaries, but also to have lacked a basic understanding of human complexity and the subtleties of moral life.<sup>6</sup> Some of Benda's views do indeed fit the caricature of a rationalist in politics – or in the world tout court. For instance, the supposed *homme sans cœur* was one of the few French intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century who happened to be enthusiastic about the United States. But what was the reason for this enthusiasm, which Benda expressed in his diaries when travelling in the US to give lectures in the late 1930s? The apparent

standardization of American life, the 'lack of history', and the 'lack of ruins', the French visitor argued, perfectly allowed the thinker to keep thinking without being 'disturbed by the picturesque'.<sup>7</sup> Staying at motels which all looked the same, the *maître-penseur* could keep his attention firmly on eternal truths. America was 'detestable' for artists (who of course depended on the 'picturesque') – but, according to Benda, it was a 'dream for the intellectual'.<sup>8</sup> Such simple-minded dualisms have probably done more than any congenital coldness to damage Benda's posthumous reputation.

Above all, however, the professional controversialist became the victim of his own success. The one phrase of 'la trahison des clercs' overshadowed all his other work. Written in 1927, the essay posited a strict division between the temporal, the materialist, the earthly, and the emotional, on the one hand; and, on the other, the universal, unitary, and, above all, the rational. The latter, 'clerkly' values were also said to be 'static' and 'disinterested'. It was such values which had to be defended against the passions for race, class, and nation, passions which had acquired overwhelming power, but, dangerously, also more coherence and discipline, in the 20th century.<sup>9</sup>

Without false modesty, Benda saw himself in a line with Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant – and, more recently, Renan and Renouvier. Benda conceived of the latter two as staunchly rationalist, revolutionary, and republican.<sup>10</sup> They were the ideal 'clerks', men who had resisted the temptations of the earthly life – including, Benda emphasized, the ever-present temptation to marry and to have too many 'practical interests' as 'family fathers'.<sup>11</sup> For Benda, even the modern, worldly clerks literally had to remain *célibataires*.

On the other hand, Benda, in a strident spirit of rationalist universalism, opposed the works of Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras, right-wing intellectual leaders of his day, who, in his eyes, subordinated philosophy to nationalism, and reason to passion. Even if Maurras and other right-wing thinkers actually opposed romanticism, Benda charged that emotional romanticism and nationalism were in fact on the same moral level. And nationalism, in Benda's eyes, was nothing more than a kind of enlarged or 'sacred' egotism.

In the intensely polarized political culture of the 1920s and 1930s, French nationalists and the followers of Maurras's Action Française lashed out at Benda in turn. Anti-Semites took to calling him 'Rabbi Bendada'; during the Vichy regime, when he lived (and hid) in Carcassone, then in Toulouse, he was in permanent mortal danger.<sup>12</sup> Benda was adamant that even the defeat of Nazism would not eradicate the evils of particularism, what he called 'intellectual fascism' as well as communism. And yet, late in life, he himself succumbed to the kind of partisanship he had always attacked. Thinking that Marxism was now the only way to defend universalism and democracy, he justified the show trials in Prague and Budapest, and sang Stalin's praises.<sup>13</sup> His reputation never quite recovered from this intellectual betrayal. But his case against philosophical particularism, and nationalism especially, still merits our attention.

## Benda's Spiritual Europe

Part of Benda's ongoing fight against philosophical nationalism was his 1933 pamphlet entitled *An Address to the European Nation*. It amounted to a complete manual for supranational polity-building, addressed primarily to French republican teachers and intellectuals. Benda started out with the argument that Europe had to be viewed, above all, as a moral idea and, even more so, as a moral problem. European unification could not simply be treated as an economic or even just a political project. Economic realities always had to be placed in a larger moral and spiritual framework. Here Benda explicitly referred to Fichte – on whose *Addresses to the German Nation* Benda's book was obviously modelled. According to Benda, it was Fichte's lectures during the Napoleonic occupation of Prussia, not the mundane integration through the *Zollverein*, that is, the customs union, which had made a united Germany.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, in Benda's view, Fichte's *Addresses* were nothing less than the 'catechism of nationalism'. They revealed the essential and therefore irremediable immorality of nationalism. In Benda's eyes, Fichte had managed the perverse feat of joining nationality and immortality by arguing that nationally conscious individuals could attain eternity through their membership of the nation. For Benda, this idea was morally repugnant, as particularism and eternity were by their nature in contradiction. Benda sought to put the nation in its place as a purely temporal matter, and to wrest the lofty and eternal ideals of universalism away from any form of nationalism.

In fact, Benda was bent on an all-out destruction of the 19th century, in which, according to the self-declared anti-nationalist, a complete 'reversal of values' had taken place. This reversal had happened for the most part under German auspices. Idealism and spiritualism had been replaced by romanticism and materialism; above all, universalism had been corroded by nationalism.<sup>15</sup> For Benda, there had to be a return from Marx to Plato, from an essentially Germanic modernity with its attendant materialist and nationalist myths to a Hellenic past. Moral sanity required nothing less than an 'intellectual disarmament' as a response to the chauvinistic and belligerent philosophies which Fichte and his ilk had spread in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

In moments of weakness, Benda conceded that perhaps in the 19th century nationalism had sometimes also been a force for collective liberation and democratic self-determination. He never entertained any doubt, however, that in the 20th century nationalism had become the weapon of choice for those defending hierarchies and order, and, above all, those advocating violence as a political means. Nationalism had always been at least a morally ambiguous idea, but the actual political uses to which nationalist ideals had been put had by now fatally and irredeemably compromised nationality.

This of course left the question why 'Europe' was to be the appropriate framework for a return to a pristine universalism (or, as Benda sometimes argued, an

idealized version of Hellenism). Benda posited an internal connection between abstract universalism and Europe. According to Benda, there was as yet no 'European being'; as he put it: 'Europe will be a product of your spirit, of the will of your spirit, not a product of your being'.<sup>17</sup> Thus the task of 'building Europe' was primarily an intellectual, moral, and, above all, spiritual one.

Benda had a clear normative argument or justification for the integration of the continent: Europe would be more moral by virtue of being less particular. He thus implored his colleagues: 'intellectuals of all countries, you must be the ones to tell your nations that they are always in the wrong by the single fact that they are nations'. And he went so far as to admonish them: 'Plotin turned red for having a body. You must be the ones who turn red for having a nation.'<sup>18</sup> In other words, Benda sought to mandate European intellectuals to drive home the point that nationality as such was morally compromised. The question was not whether particular communities really existed or not, whether they were 'imagined' or real. Particularity as such was morally suspect, and a collective moral effort was required to transcend it. Therefore 'Europe' *automatically* amounted to moral progress.

It remained unclear, however, whether there was something spiritual about Europe *as such* – or whether it was simply the conscious moral effort on behalf of individual Europeans to transcend national particularities which would effectively lead to a spiritually purified Europe. In other words, was there an internal connection between the idea of Europe and its supposed qualities on the one hand and rationalist universalism *à la* Benda on the other – or was European unification merely a first step on the path away from all passions and particularities? Or, to put it differently, was there in some sense a particular 'fit' between Europe – perhaps as the heir of Hellenism – and the moral work of detaching oneself from the particular? Or could that moral work – which had a kind of universalist self-refashioning as its most important outcome – be as well performed with objects other than Europe? Benda never answered this question in a satisfactory manner.

Throughout his pro-European writings, Benda was adamant that 'Europe will be serious or it will not be at all'.<sup>19</sup> For Benda, far-reaching conclusions followed from this dictum: he argued that Europeans had to do nothing less than discard the passions as such. He claimed that, by definition almost, there could never be poets of European unification, as poets, in his view, always remained attached to the emotional and the concrete. In fact, he had a long list of what he called the 'natural enemies' of Europe: at the very top were those invested in what Benda called 'le pittoresque' (but also simple 'amusement'), as well as those attached to the romantic idea of 'heroism' (or what Benda called the 'moralists of heroism').<sup>20</sup>

European unification, in short, was conceived as a victory of the abstract over the concrete – although again it remained unclear whether it was the cause or consequence of a comprehensive reordering of values. But it certainly needed nothing less than what Benda called a depreciation of the 'monde sensible' and the 'l'esprit pratique'.<sup>21</sup> Intellectual – that is, rational – works had to be elevated above 'works

of sensibility', science above poetry. According to Benda, science was about seeing uniformity in diversity, whereas the literary stood for seeing diversity in what appeared to be identical. Time and again, Benda insisted that the category of the *Same* had to be put above that of the *Other*.<sup>22</sup> Thus, unifying Europe also had direct implications for a hierarchy of academic disciplines, and even modes of human experience as such. Where Europeans chose to focus their attention – the Same or the Other – was thus a deeply moral question.

At the same time, Benda never denied that the reordering of values he was calling for would exact its own costs. According to Benda, 'Europe will be much less "amusing" than the nations, which were already less so than the provinces. One has to choose: make Europe or stay eternal children.'<sup>23</sup> It was only logical, then, that intellectuals should be called upon to render ridiculous and morally reprehensible anything that Benda condemned as 'amusement'. For Benda the passions themselves were a form of 'amusement' and so had to be made look ridiculous – through, above all, rigorous reasoning.

Yet it remained unclear how much anti-passion propaganda was really required. At some points Benda appeared sure that the 'anti-European spirit', the 'fury of separation', had already exhausted itself. A scheme in which each nation remained closed in with its own religion and worship of itself (and where the *clerics* zealously supported such national self-worship) was already an outmoded idea.<sup>24</sup> Yet, for the most part, Benda had no real quasi-Hegelian trust in the right direction of history, and the moral urgency – not to say passion – with which his *Address* appealed to fellow European intellectuals indicates that the task of unifying Europe needed the conscious efforts of the International of *Clerics*.

## **A French Europe, or the Particularity of the Universal**

It would not be frightfully difficult to show that Benda's universalism came in a rather peculiar, if not to say, particular, shape. In fact, Benda's vision of the world was itself not cleansed of nationalism. As Michael Walzer has pointed out, 'when it came to the French and the Germans, he was never a disinterested clerk'.<sup>25</sup> Benda very much conformed to a whole range of French thinkers at a time when, as Jeremy Jennings has put it, 'the pages of France's philosophical journals' were 'being littered with articles comparing the national psychologies and philosophies of France and Germany'.<sup>26</sup>

Benda argued, for instance, that Franco-German reconciliation – which of course primarily had to take place in the realm of the spirit – depended on Germans admitting their intellectual mistakes and 'bad thinking'. As so often in French discussions of universalism, the 'dangers of particularism' did not remain abstract, but were identified with a particular anti-French agent – in this case the Germans, according to Benda the very inventors of particularism as an ethical system.<sup>27</sup>

resemble a hexagon. When he asked the question 'what will be the supranational language', there could be no doubt about the answer. Benda, as an exponent of what has been called 'French linguistic universalism', made it clear that his rational Europe would of course choose the most rational language.

In fact, France as a whole was nothing less than 'la nation qui raisonne'.<sup>28</sup> Therefore French *clercs* were also in a unique position to counter and ultimately destroy the 19th-century ideologies of 'originality', 'spontaneity', 'action', and 'invention' – the very romantic values which Benda located at the heart of German-inspired nationalism. By a fortuitous coincidence, however, such intellectual services to a rational, united Europe would also 'restore among the Europeans the supreme estimation for the rational fatherland of man, for the Socratic spirit and for the French genius'.<sup>29</sup>

More subtly, however, one might point out that Benda's proposal amounted to a projection of Ernest Renan's famous definition of the nation onto Europe.<sup>30</sup> Benda's was an entirely *voluntarist* conception of collective identity, that is, a matter of individuals willing to live together and form a collective political body. According to Benda, previous attempts to unify Europe had failed for the simple reason that 'Europe' did not want to be made, or, rather, Europeans did not want to be unified.<sup>31</sup> The French, on the other hand, had always been the voluntarist nation par excellence. They truly had wanted to be a nation;<sup>32</sup> and remaining committed to the very idea of France had repeatedly allowed the French to overcome feudal disunity, invasions, and religious wars.<sup>33</sup>

Benda, however, did not neglect the elements of a nation other than the 'plebiscite des tous les jours' which Renan had famously described. Common memories – and common amnesias – were, after all, as important as the daily will to be part of a particular political collective. Thus, Benda called not least for a comprehensive rewriting of European history. Revised narratives would cover the 'good Europeans' – and stretch from Charlemagne to Napoleon (with Napoleon, according to Benda, being in fact more European than French).

Conversely, for Benda it had to be made clear that 'clercs' such as Bodin and Machiavelli – and, above all, the humanists who had supported the idea of national sovereignty – were in fact guilty of intellectual treason.<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, however, in order to convince Europeans of the merits of integration, 'heroes of the European idea' had to be paraded in front of their mental eyes, with Erasmus as a prime example.<sup>35</sup> Europe, as Benda never tired of pointing out, was an idea – but, as he occasionally conceded, one still had to *love* the idea. Hence the incessant search to find 'heroes of reason' like Erasmus.<sup>36</sup> But hence also the ambiguity between a rationalist universalism rationally endorsed – and a rationalist universalism made concrete and even lovable through particular stories.

## Making Europe: Two Strategies

Throughout his pro-European appeals, Benda wavered between two strategies of polity-building. On the one hand, he seemed to suggest that European unification required nothing less than a comprehensive reshaping of moral psychology. To be good Europeans, citizens would have to become less attached to their own, less egoistic, less prey to their passions. Benda never made it clear, however, whether such a rational and universalist morality was a strict precondition of European unity or a consequence of integration achieved through the pioneering work of intellectuals such as himself. One thing seemed clear, however: there was nothing essentially 'more moral' about Europe as such. Rather, it might serve as a first goal in the search for ever larger, ever more abstract human associations, with a global, universalist, and rational association as the logical culmination. In short, Europe was a convenient first target in what one might call Benda's strategic geopolitics of universalist morality – it was nothing more.

On the other hand, Benda at numerous points seemed to fall back on what might be called a moral strategy of redirection or replacement.<sup>37</sup> European polity-building required a redirection of political passions from individual nation states to the 'European nation' (which, after all, Benda was already addressing in the title of his book and which, in a sense, he was trying to call into being). Good Europeans were still allowed to love political ideas – as long as they loved the *right* political ideas. And, in a way that Benda never quite explained, these right ideas had to be uniquely embodied in Europe, as otherwise the political love Benda sought to elicit could have had quite different objects below or above the European level.

In this second strategy, moral and political psychology were a given – intellectuals, one might say, had to work with the human material at hand and make Europeans more receptive to the right ideals, or, if necessary, manipulate their peoples into endorsing them. As Benda put it at one point, 'it's a matter of opposing to nationalist pragmatism another pragmatism, to the idols other idols, to myths other myths, to this mystique another mystique'. And he went on to define the real task of the intellectuals with the words: 'to make gods'. Or, at the very least, one had to understand that the educators of Europe first had to be converted from 'the gods of the North' to the 'gods of the Mediterranean'. Benda even admitted that 'you will only vanquish nationalist passion with another passion. This could be the passion of reason. But the passion of reason is a passion, and wholly another thing than reason.' Raymond Aron had already pointed out in his 1928 review of *La Trahison* that Benda was a romantic despite himself who shared the assumptions about moral psychology made by his supposed philosophical adversaries, such as Rousseau.<sup>38</sup> As it turned out, Aron had seen right through the rationalist façade, and detected the 'romantic of reason' that Benda also was.

Benda's apparent moral (and, even more so, rationalist) defeatism uneasily existed beside the ambitious project of reshaping European morality, a project

which intellectually at least appeared coherent and which Benda for the most part pursued uncompromisingly. He had no faith in tourism and commerce as indirect methods of political integration; only a self-conscious reshaping of the inner life would do. According to this strategy of reshaping, nations could not retain any of their particularity or their 'national moralities'. The potential of human 'fraternization', which was evidenced by nationalism in a limited manner, had to be consistently extended; there had to be a comprehensive overcoming of any 'egoisme sacré'<sup>39</sup> and, above all, the will to be distinct and to set oneself against others.

Since Benda admitted that 'to exist is to be distinct', it followed logically that 'effectively, Europe shall be a certain renouncement of man of himself, a certain defection of man from the existence in the real mode'.<sup>40</sup> This is the stringent moral universalist Benda setting out his plan for a profound reshaping of moral psychology. And when he understood European unification as a pure moral project, he also resisted the idea of a 'European nationalism' or 'European sovereignty'. Europe, contrary to what the title of his own pamphlet implied, was precisely not to be another nation. It was a different political (and moral) entity altogether – and an entity which before too long might itself be dissolved in a truly global political project of turning human beings from passion to reason.

Even if such a pure universalist Europe could not be achieved in the immediate future, every step in the right direction, according to Benda, would yield a moral reward. As he put it:

. . . even an impious Europe will necessarily be less impious than the nation. Because it calls for the devotion of man to a less precise group, less individualized, and consequently less humanly loved, less carnally embraced. The European will be less attached to Europe than the Frenchman to France or the German to Germany. He will feel much less defined by the soil, less faithful to the land. Even if you make Europe sovereign, the god of immaterialism will smile upon you.<sup>41</sup>

It thus seemed that abstraction as such acquired moral status. And it also seemed that intellectuals should be grateful for every advance in human detachment. Yet, such an injunction appeared to conflict again with the call for an attachment to the 'European nation'. In the end, the tension between strategies of reshaping and redirection was never resolved.

## **Conclusion: Benda's Legacy and the Case for Clarity Restated**

Seemingly unperturbed by the cataclysms of the 1930s and 1940s, Benda kept reiterating his ideas during and after the war. At the famous Geneva 'International Encounters' in 1946, Benda point by point repeated his earlier vision.<sup>42</sup> The teaching of history still had to be 'Europeanized'; French still was deemed to be the obvious supranational language; and 'universal science' still had to be elevated over 'picturesque literature'. Yet his ideas were quickly dismissed by other philosophers such as Jean Wahl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his quest for

European unity was even called quasi-totalitarian.<sup>43</sup> Especially during the dawn of the Cold War, Benda appeared hopelessly idealistic with his plans for a Europe cleansed of political passions. At the same time, his strict – and, in the eyes of many critics, sterile – rationalist dualisms were seen as profoundly unhelpful in an intensely polarized world of competing universalisms.

Yet Benda's ideas did not disappear completely. Present champions of (French) universalism keep referring to Benda in their arguments against 'communitarianism' – the code word, in French debates, for any kind of particularism, and nationalism and *multiculturalisme* in particular.<sup>44</sup> In a related manner, the thought of the man who so rigorously elevated the *Same* over the *Other*, can easily be used in attacks on postmodernism and all kinds of relativist doctrines.

More importantly, however, the basic tension in Benda's thought on European unification is arguably still to be found in many current positions on the desirability of integrating the continent. On the one hand, there remains the belief that any transcendence of the nation qua particular is morally desirable. For instance, Bernard-Henri Lévy claims that:

... what I call Europe is what makes me feel a little less French today than I felt yesterday. Europe's greatest merit, in my view, would be to allow a growing number of French people – though the rule also applies, of course, to Germans, Italians and Spaniards – to be able to say 'I am no longer French, but European of French origin'.<sup>45</sup>

In the same vein, Pierre Bourdieu, in a talk entitled 'The Scientific and Artistic International', had already appealed to fellow European intellectuals in 1991:

... I would like us to become a sort of European Parliament of Culture. European, in the sense that this would be a step forward to a higher level of universalization, which for me would already be better than being French.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, the most blatant wavering between strategies of redirection and replacement can probably be found in the appeal for a 'renewal of Europe' co-signed by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in May 2003.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, Habermas and Derrida defined Europe with reference to ethical 'values', which would supposedly allow it to play the role of a 'civilizing' counterpart to the United States. A united Europe would be a new kind of ethicopolitical entity, which could even serve as a model of concretely realized universalism to other parts of the globe.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Europe appeared as a de facto civic nation, potentially sustained by the 'power of sentiments' demonstrated on the streets of Madrid, Paris, and London, when hundreds of thousands marched against the Iraq war in February 2003. Strategies of redirection and rejection on the one hand, and reshaping on the other, seemed hopelessly conflated.<sup>49</sup>

As has been pointed out many times, Benda's strict dualism between disinterested devotion to eternal, universal values on the one side and particularist, passionate nationalism on the other is deeply problematic. Simply put, the opposition of reason to passion and partiality does not automatically map onto the difference between justice and injustice, let alone morality and immorality.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, not only was Benda often inconsistent in applying his own criteria of proper clerky interventions, these criteria were also multiple, shifting, and, on occasion, internally contradictory.<sup>51</sup>

Yet Benda's call for intellectual self-clarification and for an honest sense of where one stands on the spectrum of intellectual commitment retains its moral force. For all his pathos (and his unfortunate philosophical confusions), Benda articulated an ethics of engagement which put clear limits to unthinking communitarianism. At the same time, his own case also reveals the limits of unthinking universalism, or rather the tendency to drift from universalist aspirations to the kind of 'realism' and 'pragmatism' which Benda usually abhorred once the powerful symbol, and space for projections, of 'Europe' entered the picture. This is not a psychological point; it is a conceptual one. Benda's problem arose precisely because he did not draw any lines between the pragmatics of polity-building and morally unacceptable particularism. If anything, 'Europe' served to create a grey area where Benda should have used the light – or perhaps laser – of clear distinctions.

Advocates of 'Europe' are of course not committing intellectual treason, the misgivings of British Eurosceptics notwithstanding. But they ought to be clear about which strategy they opt for – and which hopes they invest in a united continent. Not least, they ought to ask themselves whether they share Benda's assumption that nationality as such is somehow ethically compromised by virtue of its inevitable particularism. Then they might ask themselves further whether Europe might become a kind of 'clerky kingdom', as Benda initially envisaged, or perhaps merely a political space for attenuated national passions – which amounted to Benda saying something like 'reason for the clerks – reasonable passions for the *laïques*'. But some should also ask themselves why they might be tempted to share Benda's assumption that Europe is more or less by definition the privileged site for the emergence of a pure universalism. To be sure, the universal 'can only appear through something particular; only a particular can make the universal known', as Martti Koskenniemi has put it.<sup>52</sup> But why Europe is *that* particular still needs an argument. And the question is surely legitimate whether a 'universalist Europe' might not often turn out to be a profoundly ambiguous aspiration. Is not the whole enterprise of hitching values to geography inevitably in danger of contaminating moral ideals with ultimately arbitrary forms of particularity?

'Europe' has throughout the ages tended to be invested with enormous moral (and even religious) hopes – after all, Benda himself already claimed in 1933 that 'the European problem is, at base, a religious problem'.<sup>53</sup> In other words, Europe is a space of multiple and overlapping projections, and subject to conflicting political and intellectual strategies. Intellectual honesty *à la* Benda does not require adopting one strategy of integration or another. But it does require transparency of one's position both vis-à-vis oneself and others.

## Notes

1. Michael Walzer (1989) *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*, p. 29. London: Peter Halban.
2. Antoine Compagnon (2005) *Les Antimodernes: De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, pp. 295–6. Paris: Gallimard.
3. Robert J. Niess (1956) *Julien Benda*, p. 29. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
4. David L. Schalk (1971) 'La Trahison des clercs – 1927 and Later', *French Historical Studies* 7: 245–63, p. 245.
5. Not a few accounts have connected Benda's peculiar intellectual–emotional inner life with his Jewishness. See for instance Louis-Albert Revah (1991) *Julien Benda: Un misanthrope juif dans la France de Maurras*. Paris: Plon.
6. Niess (n. 3), pp. 23 and 9.
7. Julien Benda (1950) *Les Cahiers d'un clerc (1936–1949)*, pp. 21–2. Paris: Émile-Paul Frères.
8. *Ibid.* p. 22.
9. Julien Benda (1927; 2003) *La Trahison des Clercs*, pp. 134–8. Paris: Grasset.
10. Compagnon (n. 2), p. 304.
11. Julien Benda (1937; 1964) *Précision (1930–1937)*, p. 9. Paris: Gallimard.
12. Compagnon (n. 2), p. 334.
13. See for instance Benda's reactions as recorded by François Fejtö, when Fejtö sought to inform Benda of the reality behind the Rajk trial. François Fejtö (1986) *Mémoires de Budapest à Paris*, p. 213. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
14. Julien Benda (1933; 1993) *Discours à la nation européenne*, p. 15. Paris: Gallimard. Like most interpreters, Benda completely overlooked the strange mixture of universalism and particularism in Fichte's thought. See Hans Kohn (1949) 'The Paradox of Fichte's Nationalism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10: 319–43.
15. For Benda's most explicit attack on romanticism, see his 1948 *Trois Idoles romantiques: Le Dynamisme – l'existentialisme – la dialectique matérialiste*. Geneva: Mont-Blanc.
16. Benda (n. 14), p. 63.
17. *Ibid.* p. 67.
18. *Ibid.* p. 71.
19. *Ibid.* p. 51.
20. *Ibid.* p. 101.
21. *Ibid.* p. 45.
22. *Ibid.* p. 54.
23. *Ibid.* p. 51.
24. *Ibid.* p. 36.
25. Walzer (n. 1), p. 35. See also Michel Winock (1997) *Le Siècle des intellectuels*, pp. 199–200. Paris: Seuil.
26. Jeremy Jennings (1999) 'The Clash of Ideas: Political Thought, Intellectuals and the Meanings of "France", 1890–1945', in Martin Alexander (ed.) *French History since Napoleon*, pp. 203–20, p. 214. London: Arnold.
27. See also Naomi Schor (2001) 'The Crises of French Universalism', *Yale French Studies* 100: 43–64.
28. Benda (n. 14), p. 83.
29. *Ibid.* pp. 80–1.
30. See in particular Ernest Renan (1947) 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 Mars 1882', in *Œuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, vol. 1, pp. 888–906. Paris: Calman-Lévy.
31. Benda (n. 14), p. 34.
32. Julien Benda (1932) *Esquisse d'une histoire des Français dans leur volonté d'être une nation*.

Paris: Gallimard. In the preface Benda stated that he saw no contradiction between his admiration of the voluntarism of the French nation and his condemnation of particularism, and especially nationalism. He argued (pp. 8–9) that:

. . . je persiste, du point de vue moral, à tenir la volonté des hommes de s'affirmer en nation comme une forme du mal et à la condamner; mais j'admire, si je me place ensuite, et uniquement, dans le plan de cette volonté, ceux qui l'ont su réaliser; je persiste à penser que le temporel est méprisable si je le compare au spirituel; mais, jugeant le temporel en lui-même et non plus par comparaison, j'honore ceux qui y ont été grands. Au surplus, la nation se donne franchement pour une oeuvre laïque, et n'a nullement à être blâmée parce qu'elle n'adopte pas la manière d'être dont je persiste à dire qu'elle doit être celle des clercs.

33. Benda (n. 14), p. 44.
34. *Ibid.* pp. 45–6.
35. *Ibid.* p. 47.
36. *Ibid.* p. 104.
37. For this distinction see also Patchen Markell (2000) 'Making Affect Safe for Democracy? On "Constitutional Patriotism"', *Political Theory* 28(1): 38–53.
38. Raymond Aron (1928) 'A propos de la Trahison des Clercs', in *Libres Propos*, pp. 176–8.
39. Benda (n. 14), p. 122.
40. *Ibid.* p. 124.
41. *Ibid.* pp. 126–7.
42. See his lecture in (1947) *L'Esprit Européen: Textes in-extenso des conférences et des entretiens organisés par les Rencontres Internationales de Genève 1946*, pp. 10–36, and subsequent discussions. Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière.
43. See the Premier Entretien after Benda's lecture, *ibid.* pp. 59–80, p. 64.
44. See for instance Alain Finkielkraut (1987) *La Défaite de la pensée*. Paris: Gallimard. More recently, Pierre-André Taguieff (2005) *La République Enlisée: Pluralisme, 'Communautarisme' et Citoyenneté*. Paris: Éditions des Syrtes.
45. Bernard-Henri Lévy (2003) 'A Passage to Europe: The Continent isn't Just on a Journey; it is a Journey', *Time International* (18 Aug.).
46. Quoted by Alain Finkielkraut (2001) *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, p. 98. London: Pimlico.
47. Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas (2003) 'Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (31 May).
48. I go along here with Habermas's fundamental distinction between moral and ethical.
49. More recently, in the wake of the French and Dutch rejections of the EU's Draft Constitutional Treaty, Habermas has further emphasized the need for 'symbolic acts' and even 'romantic ideas'. See Jürgen Habermas (2005) 'Über die Köpfe hinweggerollt', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (6 June).
50. See in particular Walzer (n. 1).
51. Ray Nichols (1978) *Treason, Tradition, and the Intellectual: Julien Benda and Political Discourse*, p. 174. Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas.
52. Martti Koskenniemi (2005) 'International Law in Europe: Between Renewal and Tradition', *European Journal of International Law* 16: 113–24, p. 115.
53. *L'Avenir de l'Esprit Européen*, p. 108.