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The German Diktat

The 9 April meeting between the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury and Germany's super-minister Wolfgang Schäuble made it abundantly clear that neoliberal fundamentalism is now more rampant in Europe than in the United States. Faced with Jacob Lew's recommendation that Europe should put less emphasis on austerity and promote economic growth instead, the German minister defiantly replied that "nobody in Europe sees fiscal consolidation and growth as mutually contradictory," and that "it is time to put an end to this debate which says we have to choose between austerity and growth." Proving that there are alternatives to the German diktat of national-austeritarism and that those alternatives are politically viable is the greatest challenge European societies, Portugal included, have before them at the moment. It is a shared challenge, even if its specific form may vary from one country to another. European history provides very tragic evidence that this is not an easy challenge. German reason is loaded with divine predestination, which was plainly defined in 1807 by the philosopher Fichte when he contrasted the German and the foreigner in the following manner: Germans are to foreigners as spirit is to matter, as good to evil. In view of this, all compromise should be seen as a sign of weakness and inferiority. Law itself has to give in to force, lest the latter falters. When, at the beginning of the First World War, almost a century ago, Germany invaded and destroyed Belgium under the false pretense that it was defending itself from France, it did so in violation of all international

treaties, given the neutrality of that small country (historically, German aggression tends to take weaker countries as its initial target). Showing no scruples whatsoever, the German Chancellor told the Reichstag: “to right the wrong we have now committed we shall try to make good as soon as our military aim is attained. Whoever is threatened as we are, is not allowed to have any other consideration beyond that how he will hack his way through.”

Such arrogance does not preclude a certain magnanimity, as long as the victims stay on their best behavior. The note sent by the German chancellery to its Belgian counterpart on 2 August 1914 – a document which will go down in History as a monument to international deceit and felony – included conditions 3 and 4, which stipulated the following: “3. If Belgium adopts a friendly attitude, Germany is prepared, in co-operation with the Belgian authorities, to purchase all necessaries for her troops against a cash payment, and to pay an indemnity for any damage that may have been caused by German troops. 4. Should Belgium oppose the German troops, and in particular should she throw difficulties in the way of their march (...), Germany will, to her regret, be compelled to consider Belgium as an enemy.” In other words – to put it in today’s parlance –, if the Belgians behaved as model pupils, allowing themselves to be instrumentalized by German interests, their sacrifice, albeit unjust, would be met with a hypothetical reward. Failing to do that, they were to suffer mercilessly. Inspired by King Albert, Belgium, as we well know, decided not to be a model pupil and therefore paid the high price of massacre and destruction, an aggression so vile that it became known as “the rape of Belgium.”

Given this superiority *über alles*, all instances of German arrogance being humbled have always resulted in great material and human destruction, both for the populations who happen to fall victim to such arrogance and for the

German people themselves. Of course History never repeats itself, and Germany is now a country with no military power, ruled by a vibrant democracy. Three disturbing facts, however, should force the rest of the peoples of Europe to heed History. First of all, it is disturbing to see how Germany's economic power has been turned into the wellspring of a European orthodoxy that, contrary to what Germany would have us believe, benefits no one but the latter. Back in 1914 the imperial government also wanted to convince the Belgian people that the German invasion of the country was for their own good – “essential for the self-defence of Germany” –, and that the “German Government would feel the deepest regret if Belgium regarded [the invasion] as an act of hostility,” as stated in the above-mentioned infamous note. Secondly, there are the disturbing displays of prejudice against Latin countries in German public opinion. One cannot but think of Ludwig Woltmann (1871-1907), the racist German anthropologist who, vexed by the genius of such Latin personalities as Dante, Da Vinci, Galileo, etc., sought to germanize them. The story goes, for example, that he wrote Benedetto Croce asking whether the great Gianbattista Vico was tall and blue-eyed. Still he wouldn't be unruffled by the negative response, to which he in turn replied: “Be it as it may, Vico obviously comes from the German Wieck”. This all sounds ludicrous today, but it comes to mind especially in view of the third disturbing fact. A survey of German high school students (between ages 14 and 16) conducted just over a year ago showed that a third of the respondents did not know who Hitler was and that 40% believed that human rights had always been observed by the German governments since 1933.

Coimbra (Portugal) May 1, 2013