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Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi. A re-reading for the future of Europe

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Although it has not yet found its full recognition and implementation, Kalergi's thought represents a turning point in thinking about the state in the contemporary era. His project of Pan-Europe, described by many as merely utopian, represents a first concrete attempt to redefine statehood in a supranational key. The article investigates the contents of his thought and brings to light the extent to which his legacy continues to influence today's political debate on European integration, offering suggestions on the current challenges related to the relationship between national sovereignty and European institutions.

KEYWORDS

Kalergi, Pan-Europa, European history, European institutions, federalism

1 Introduction

Although the historical-institutional examination of the period between the two world wars is still full of dynamics to be dealt with, there is a growing interest in the way in which the role of the state is invested in relation to the emerging ideas of those years concerning the debate on the creation of a united Europe (Mikkeli, 2002). From this perspective, Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972) represents one of the most influential thinkers in 20th century European political thought, emerging as a key figure in the redefinition of the concept of European statehood after the First World War¹. His ideas, developed at a time marked by the radicalization of nationalism, introduced the debate on the construction of a supranational state and on forms of European integration into the European scenario, making him, at the same time, interesting for the evolution of political thought in those years, but also highly topical.

Kalergi was, in fact, one of the first theorists to look at overcoming the nation-state as conceived at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, redefining the concept of the state, proposing a theory of sovereignty understood not as absolute, but shared between several levels of government to guarantee peace, stability and progress (Pistone, 1975).

After all, the First World War had been the most acute manifestation of the crisis of the European states of the time (Fernández-Figares, 2014), revealing the impotence and inability of European imperialism to cope with the loss of the nation-state. All the fragilities that this state form had tried in vain to conceal emerged and “*the identity of ratio and voluntas on which the nineteenth-century ideology of the rule of law had been founded was now revealed to be a fiction*” (Portinaro, 2007, p. 16).

¹ For a more in-depth biography of Kalergi, see Simonetti (2017) *Kalergi: la prossima scomparsa degli europei*, pp. 23–26, Nexus edizioni, Padova.

In parallel with the decline of the European state-form, the idea that the solution could be a United Europe was developing, and it is in this context that Coudenhove-Kalergi's thinking fits in [Monceri \(2020\)](#). Starting from the failure of the centralized model of the nation-state and the 19th century imperial idea, he evolved toward a supranational structure, proposing the creation of a system of governance based on cooperation and peace ([Andrén, 2023](#)).

2 The birth of the Pan-European idea in the post-war international context

Born in Tokyo in 1894, the second son of Heinrich von Coudenhove Kalergi and Mitsuko Aoyama, Kalergi grew up in an aristocratic and cosmopolitan environment, which deeply influenced his vision of an integrated European state. During the First World War, he initially supported the League of Nations, imagining it as a possible container within which to overcome the state fragmentation of Europe. But this instrument, initially conceived for forms of stabilization, soon proved ineffective, losing credibility due to the *de facto* exclusion of the defeated powers, the adoption of the principle of unanimity in decision-making—which limited its operability—and the lack of support from the United States, whose government did not ratify its membership.

"I became passionately Wilsonian, even though Wilson was fighting on the other side of the barricade. But I shared this enthusiasm for Wilson and his ideas with most Austrians, including their young Emperor Charles, who succeeded his great-uncle Franz Joseph in December 1916. From the first day of his reign he did his best to secure a negotiated peace on Wilson's principles, against those of Ludendorff, Clemenceau and Lloyd George. But events were stronger than his good will. The issues of the war had been reduced to simple black-and-white terms, when a second political leader emerged in the East whose new ideals and goals necessitated a reshuffling of all economic and political values, at least within Central Europe, which came very close to the new ideological radius of Soviet Russia²".

The emergence of a new world order, in which the United Nations' potential for peaceful cooperation was diminished, and the definitive abandonment of issues relating to the fate of Europe, marked the end of this experiment:

"It seemed that no one was interested in promoting the unification of Europe. Certainly there was no movement with that specific aim. Nor was there any literature that could serve as a beginning. The political newspapers were full of articles on all kinds of issues, except that of the future of Europe³".

In the aftermath of the Great War, the international community was thus confronted with the failure of an institution that, in theory, should have ensured world peace, but instead proved to

be a means of consolidating power for the victorious nations ([Honsik, 2005](#)). This failure prompted Kalergi to conceive a new model of supranational organization, which culminated in 1922 with the foundation of the Pan-European Union, which was followed, inspired by the ideal of Giuseppe Mazzini's Giovine Europa⁴, by the drafting of his *Paneuropa* manifesto in early 1923, at the age of 29.

The book was first published in October 1923 by the Paneuropa-Verlag publishing house, which quickly became the hub of the pan-European movement, producing thousands of leaflets in order to spread pan-European ideas widely ([Iannò, 2008](#)). In his autobiography *"An Idea Conquers the World"*, Kalergi accurately traces the milestones of his political commitment. In particular, in the chapter *"I Start a Movement"*, he elaborates on the reasons that led him to write *Pan-Europe*, outlining the context and motivations behind his European integration project:

"My book Pan-Europe appeared in early October 1923 under the auspices of our publishing house, the Paneuropa-Verlag, which we had founded in Vienna a few months earlier. The idea of founding an independent publishing house had intrigued me for some time. I had finally decided when, during the German inflation, all my income from the publishing house that published my pamphlet 'Aristocracy' amounted to five free copies of the pamphlet. No other publishing house would have been able to produce thousands of propaganda pamphlets needed for the rapid spread of our ideas. The Paneuropa-Verlag thus became the backbone of our entire movement, without recourse to either subsidies or external financial aid. Each copy of my book contained a card, addressed to me, on which were printed the words: 'I wish to become a member of the Pan-European Union'. In the first month alone, more than a thousand members signed up, and from then on, every post brought with it a mass of new members" ([Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1954](#), p. 98).

Later, articles by Kalergi were published in the *Vossische Zeitung* in Berlin and the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna. The spread of his ideas led to over a thousand people joining the movement within a few days and within a short time Kalergi chose a Red Cross as the movement's emblem, a symbol of solidarity and unity:

"had been the flag of medieval crusaders, it seemed the oldest known symbol of European supranational brotherhood. In more recent times, it has also gained recognition as a symbol of international relief work. The sun was chosen to represent the achievements of European culture in helping to illuminate the world. Thus, Hellenism and Christianity—the cross of Christ and the sun of Apollo—stood side by side as the enduring pillars of European civilization. For our motto, I chose the beautiful phrase attributed to St. Augustine: 'Unity in needs—freedom in doubts—charity in all things⁵".

2 HAEU - UWK - NS - DOC - 316, *First world war*, R. C. Kalergi.

3 HAEU - UWK - NS - DOC - 316, *cit*.

4 For further study see [Piccardo \(2020\)](#), *Dalla patria all'umanità, l'Europa di Giuseppe Mazzini*. Il Mulino, Bologna. In addition to Mazzini's thought, the influence had in his education by thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, Friedrich Nietzsche and Rudolf Kjellén, whose ideas helped shape his political and philosophical conception, is fundamental and often referred to by him.

The publication of Kalergi's book, which lucidly addressed the challenges of statehood and European unification, boosted membership of the movement, while the emergence of several pan-European sections marked the consolidation of the movement in Vienna, where the central office was located in the premises of the former Imperial Palace. The office became a powerful source of propaganda, able to infiltrate the most prestigious political and intellectual circles (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1938).

Kalergi's analysis was distinguished by his remarkable foresight, evidenced by the formulation of political and economic proposals that would only be implemented in later years. In particular, Kalergi was among the first to conceive the integration of Europe's industrial resources, proposing the union of German coal and French ore, an idea that would constitute the fundamental prerequisite for the birth of the European Coal and Steel Community, formally established in 1950. This proposal marked a departure from traditional state models, suggesting a system of economic governance that limited the exclusive power of nation states over their own resources (Bobbio, 1973).

Kalergi conceived Europe not only as a unitary cultural reality, but also as a supranational state construction, representing a radical break from the political strategies prevailing in the 1920s. This innovative and forward-looking vision was distinguished by its ability to anticipate a new paradigm in international relations.

It is crucial to consider the historical context in which Kalergi operated and the difficulties he encountered in seeking support for a project that appeared utopian at the time.

"One will reproach this union with being a utopia. The objection does not hold water. No natural law stands in the way of its realization. This proposal corresponds to the interests of the overwhelming majority of Europeans and harms only a shrinking minority. This small but powerful minority, which today holds sway over the destiny of Europe, will want to brand the Pan-European ideal with the mark of utopia. This accusation will have to be countered with the fact that every historical event started out as utopia and ended up as reality [...]. Whether an idea turns into reality or remains at the stage of utopia usually depends only on the commitment and number of those who support it. As long as only a few thousand supporters believe in Pan-Europe it will be a utopia; when there are millions, it will become a political programme; when there are a hundred million, it will become reality. The future of the union of Europe therefore depends on the faith and dynamism of its first thousand adherents, faith and dynamism that will enable them to convince

reality. I appeal to the youth of Europe to carry out this work (see footnote 3)".

Based on the need to ensure an incremental and not a whirlwind integration process, Kalergi concisely laid down the pillars on how and which model Europe should follow in order to achieve its unification, in the wake of other federative examples:

"Today, the powers that run the world are federations: Russia, America, England. Europe will have to follow this example. It will have to complete the modernization of its means of communication with a modern organization of its states within itself. If this is not done, Europe, blind to reality, runs toward a new war and is threatened with the danger of succumbing under a deluge of toxic bomb" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1997, p. 26).

He had already realized that the European countries, isolated, would not last long and would not withstand the strong currents created by the end of the Great War. The world, as envisioned by Kalergi, would have consisted of five basic blocs: Pan-America, England, the Russian Empire, the Mongolian Empire (consisting of China and Japan) and, without a shadow of a doubt, Pan-Europe, which would have brought together all the European countries and their colonial possessions, extending to include half of Africa and substantial parts of south-east Asia (Brugmans, 1965).

Within this world picture, Kalergi was convinced of one fundamental aspect: Europe should not rely on either the Americans or the Russians.

"Both hopes are life-threatening for Europe. Neither the West nor the East will save Europe: Russia wants to conquer it, America wants to buy it" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1997, p. 18).

From the very first pages of his work, Kalergi appears extremely precise in drawing the borders of his Pan-Europe, but questions the fate of Russia and England. Doubts emerged already on this preliminary question: should they or should they not be part of Pan-Europe? For the Russian question, the knot was quickly untied: a compact federation between a Soviet power and democratic states would have been impossible. Moreover, Kalergi felt that Russia's Mongolian-Asian heritage was too far removed from European culture.

As far as England was concerned, however, the issue was more complex. According to Kalergi, it was destined to become the intermediary between Europe and America, without belonging politically to either. Pan-Europe, or united Europe, was, therefore, to be built without England, but not against it.

"Britain is itself a continent that is neither European, nor Asian, nor African, nor Australian, nor American: it is British. It is not geographical ties that maintain the cohesion of this continent, but the language and culture of the dominant nation and the political wisdom of its statesmen" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1997, p. 49).

Great Britain, for its part, approached the issue from two different perspectives: on the one hand, geographically it felt

5 HAEU - UWK - NS - DOC - 316, *The puzzle that was Europe*, Kalergi R.C. Kalergi's reflections clearly indicate that the debate on Europe's Christian identity is not a recent phenomenon, but has its roots in a deep and complex past. The question of determining whether the reference to Christianity represents a secularised religion or whether it constitutes an "identity marker that refers to a set of values that no longer have anything Christian about them?" is an extremely difficult one. This question is part of a broader context that questions the foundations of European culture, its traditions and its sense of belonging (cf. Roy, 2019), *Is Europe still Christian? Cosa resta delle nostre radici religiose*, transl. it. by M. Zurlo, Feltrinelli, Milan, pp. 156.

European and wanted Europe to operate within the pan-European union, on the other hand it did not want to associate itself too closely with Europe.⁶ Already at the time, Kalergi prefigured a federal structure, indicating that “the culmination of pan-European aspirations would be the establishment of the United States of Europe, following the example of the United States of America. Pan-Europe would appear before the other continents and world powers as a unity, while within the federation each of the states would have maximum freedom (see footnote 6)”.

The dream of Pan-Europe would have been realized through the creation of two chambers: a House of Peoples and a House of States. The House of Peoples was to consist of ~300 deputies (one per million inhabitants), while the House of States would bring together the 26 governments of Europe.

Kalergi firmly maintained that any political institution based on law must necessarily be backed by a force capable of guaranteeing its effectiveness and stability. In his view, the fragility of the League of Nations was precisely due to the lack of a coercive power capable of enforcing its decisions, thus leading to its failure. Similarly, he believed that any government structure without a solid legal foundation was inevitably doomed to collapse (Duclos, 1962).

On the basis of this conceptual framework, Kalergi analyzed the governments existing in the various European states, highlighting their characteristics and limitations. He observed how Great Britain, although a free country with an established parliamentary system, had a constitution that only partially incorporated democratic principles. In contrast, Russia, Italy and Germany, although formally founded on popular sovereignty and the majority principle, could not be considered truly free, as their regimes severely restricted civil and political freedoms. The United States and Switzerland, on the other hand, could represent examples of governments that were both free and democratic, but lacked a traditional parliamentary system, as their stability was not dependent on any parliamentary votes of no confidence (Albonetti, 1964). Kalergi's goal was, therefore, the creation of a European state capable of integrating freedom, democracy and parliamentarianism, synthesizing the essential elements of a complete and balanced government into a single institutional structure.

“The pan-European programme envisages the political and economic unification of all democracies on the European continent to form a strong and viable federal state. A strong European federal empire should replace the miserable era of European fragmentation. This programme is pacifist imperialism. [...] Pan-Europe can only be realized slowly” (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1925, p. 58).

Kalergi also emphasized a number of advantages that Europe would gain by forming a federation. First, it would have guaranteed security against a new European war and favored European neutrality in world conflicts. Moreover, it would have offered protection against a Russian invasion and made a disarmament process possible. Economically, it would have allowed Europe to compete on an equal footing with the big American and British

industries. The democratic parties would also have benefited, being able to develop a more positive and active foreign policy, free of the excesses of chauvinism and at the same time without lapsing into cosmopolitanism (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1965).

Kalergi's project, therefore, had two fundamental objectives: on the one hand, the gradual construction of a European federal union and, on the other, the demonstration of the urgency of such a form of government for the future European state that was to arise. Europe, in Kalergi's eyes, appeared to be the victim of what he called “international anarchy, oppression of the weak by the strong, latent state warfare, economic compartmentalisation, political intrigue” (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1997, p. 10). The warning was to a Europe not yet prepared to face the two main imminent dangers: the economic (and other) expansion of the United States and the persistent threat of a Russian invasion. With these words, Kalergi was trying to outline the only viable path to prevent Europe from sealing its own death sentence: unification, the fight against its own political and economic fragmentation, without relegating the question of the federal project to a mere literary issue.

3 Between the supranational state and national institutional arrangements: relations with Italy

In relation to the specificity of the Italian case, the attempts of Kalergi, who was willing to take any road in order to achieve a united Europe and Mussolini's rapprochement with Italy was an integral part of this project, are very interesting. Kalergi, in his writings, describes an Italian foreign policy that is still undecided, a policy that retains within it a latent drive toward the union of European democratic states, a drive that, however, has never been able to be fully realized

“The Mazzinian tradition was not yet dead: for Italians there was no essential contradiction between loyalty to Italy and loyalty to Europe. Italy was always greater when it was more European: in the times of its Caesars and its great Popes”.

He tried, with determination, to make contact with the Duce through various channels, without ever giving up. Initially, he published an open letter to Mussolini in the *Neue Freie Presse*, but received no reply. The Count firmly believed that, should Mussolini succeed in embracing the ideals of Pan-Europe, Italy could play the role of mediator between France and Germany, two nations that, although historically linked, were trapped in a conflict that needed resolution. In this scenario, Kalergi saw Italy, “great and united”, as the power called upon to end the division between these two sister nations.

He had contacts with Dino Grandi, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, who on 21 July 1930 wrote a letter to the president of Paneuropa to congratulate him on his work, renewing the Italian government's interest in collaborating in the construction of a future Paneuropa. In his correspondence, Grandi invited Kalergi to draw up a list of the Italian personalities he considered most suitable to form an Italian pan-European committee.

⁶ HAEU, WL - 251, über Pan-Europa, Vossische Zeitung, 9 June 1925, R. C. Kalergi.

⁷ HAEU - UWK - NS - DOC - 316, *The puzzle that was Europe*, R.C. Kalergi.

Nitti also joined Kalergi's cause, fully embracing the pan-European project and supporting the idea of a union among European nations as a solution to the geopolitical challenges of the time. According to Nitti, the current political organization of Europe does not correspond to its biological development and it was Nitti who took up the concept of utopia that Kalergi spoke of (Coudenhove-Kalergi (1939):

"I have been too many years in government, I have seen too many things, and known too many men, to feed illusions in my soul. I am above all a practical idealist. I know where the formidable forces of prejudice and ignorance lie. I know how the spirit of reaction now rages in this cynical and vulgar period, in this lightless travail of Europe. But the situation that has arisen does not allow for any illusions; either Europe will unite or Europe will fall"⁸.

Kalergi's goal was to create a higher power that would curb Hitler's emerging aspirations; he thought of Italy and France.

"But Great Britain and Soviet Russia had turned their backs on continental Europe; only France, Italy and a few smaller central European states remained for possible action against Germany, which was not yet strong enough to challenge both Latin sisters [...]. In a certain sense the fate of Europe at that time was in the hands of one man: Benito Mussolini" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1943b, p. 68).

Kalergi hoped that Mussolini would choose France over Germany but initially he remained very distant from pan-European ideals. It was only in the early 1930s that Mussolini realized that the European question could no longer be ignored by the Italian public. Thus he founded a very particular pan-European movement by subsidizing a magazine, called "Anti-Europe", which combined fascist and pan-European ideas. Within the magazine, Kalergi spoke of numerous attacks on him and the promotion of the idea of European union under the moral leadership of Mussolini himself.

Kalergi would only meet Mussolini on 10 May 1933:

"After passing through a series of narrow corridors with heavily guarded iron gates at each end—death traps for anyone who might attempt an assassination attack—I finally reached Mussolini's study and reception room. No, it was not a room: it was a huge corridor with Mussolini's desk standing at the other end silently inviting visitors to come forward. As I crossed the seemingly endless room, Mussolini continued to write without paying any attention to me" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1943a, p. 73).

But the meeting with Mussolini led nowhere because he let neither approval nor disapproval shine through. Only in January 1934 did Mussolini unexpectedly publish an article:

"We must create a Europe which will prevent its youth from rising in war against each other. This agitated youth will be

calmer within an organized Europe. But this new Europe will not emerge from the League of Nations but from a League of European Nations. Europe was the cornerstone of the world's civilization. The world has had the benefit of its leadership, but it seems now to have succumbed to America and Japan. If it wants to make a comeback and maintain itself, it must achieve some minimum of unity. What is lacking among the great nations of Europe and what must weld them together is a European spirit" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1943a, p. 78).

Two years after his first visit Kalergi saw Mussolini again on 9 May 1936, 2 days after the victory in Abyssinia:

"Mussolini's morale was high. He had reached the peak of his extraordinary career, with Hitler not yet overshadowing him. He had won the fight against the democracies, won an empire for the Italian nation and gained great prestige. He was again free to seek a closer partnership with the West or to join Hitler in his struggle against the democratic world" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1943b, p. 85).

Kalergi became convinced that Mussolini's dream was not Pan-Europe and the idea of a close Franco-Italian union, but a great Mediterranean federation of all Latin states that would control most of Africa and be linked to the Latin republics across the Atlantic, and Rome was to be the center of this new regional arrangement. Mussolini's final submission to Hitler's expansionist designs thwarted any hope of establishing a fair balance in Europe.

4 Conclusions

At the end of the Second World War, the concept of statehood proposed by Kalergi gained even greater relevance. The conflict demonstrated the limits of nationalism and absolute state sovereignty, paving the way for new forms of supranational governance. Not surprisingly, after the war, Kalergi's ideas directly influenced the European integration policies pursued by figures such as Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Alcide De Gasperi. The project of the ECSC and later the EEC took up many of the essential elements of his thought, reaffirming the need to overcome traditional statehood in favor of a European model while remaining far removed from the spirit that animated Kalergi's ideas:

"These, however, are not European patriots at all, but rather nationalists who recognize that the policy of European unification corresponds to the interests of their nations. For the Germans this is the shortest way to end the isolation into which they have fallen due to the Third Reich and the war and to quickly achieve moral, political and economic equality with the victorious powers. For the French this is the surest means of establishing a Berlin-Moscow-Beijing axis" (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1953, p. 35).

According to Kalergi, these arguments were decisive in persuading even the non-communist opposition parties

⁸ HAEU - WL - 251, Nitti Francesco, The United States of Europe.

in France and Germany, thus fostering a cross-party consensus on his ideas. In confirmation of this, he stated in 1953:

“This commonality of interests between national and European politics explains the triumph of the European idea in the last 6 years. [...] Governments have become pioneers of European unification, while parliaments hesitate to follow. Future historians will describe the triumvirate formed by Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schuman as the true architects of the European Federation, who devoted their entire personality, authority and career to this idea. The flurry of these European initiatives we have witnessed is the result of this continental government action. Without them, European unification would have taken many years. But the speed of this progress poses great dangers for the future. Europe is unifying without the majority of Europeans being ready for this unification. Europe is uniting in state chancelleries and parliaments, but not in the hearts of Europeans” (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1953, p. 48).

Although it has not yet found its full recognition and implementation, Kalergi’s thought represents a turning point in thinking about the state in the contemporary era. His project of Pan-Europe was not just a utopia, but a first concrete attempt to redefine statehood in a supranational key. His legacy continues to influence today’s political debate on European integration, offering insights into current challenges related to the relationship between national sovereignty and European institutions.

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