Chabal Transcript

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OY: Welcome to the EU Futures Podcast, exploring the emerging future in Europe. I am Olya Yordanyan, the EU Futures Podcast Coordinator at the BU Center for the Study of Europe. Today is February 23rd and I walk to Emile Chabal, a Chancellor’s Fellow in History at the University of Edinburgh.

EC: My name is Emile Chabal and I’m a Chancellor’s Fellow in History at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland in the United Kingdom, and I work on contemporary French politics and, more broadly, Post-War European history.

OY: What is the future emerging in Europe?

EC: A lot of the work that is being done on Europe that I find interesting stresses the idea of uncertainty and I think that is for me the dominant picture of what Europe is going to become. Uncertainty not because Europe was not on certain before but because I think the moment in which the Post-War European project was born the moments of the 1950s, moment dominated by the Cold War, by certain cultural and intellectual debates, and that moment has come to a close. And the big question now is how to redefine the European project and how to deepen the relationship between I suppose European institutions, European culture, and Europeans full stop.

OY: That’s very interesting, if you can elaborate a little about redefining the European project, how would you imagine it?

EC: I think the European project will have to be diverse. Not just diverse by default because Europe is an extremely diverse place, but diverse it's very conception, so that it can support different political models, so that you can support from cultural models, and so that it can build a certain form of European citizenship. And it's very striking because of course I live and work in the UK, and Britain has recently voted to leave the European Union and one of the realizations that came with that vote was a realization of everything that would be lost. Particularly young people, the people that I teach, they're very worried about a world they took for granted for the world that's about to, well potentially, about to disappear. So, I think we don't realize as Europeans what we have built, and that's another one of the big challenges ahead.

OY: How can you come to the point when you actually deliver to the people, if we don't stop here we can actually lost it. We're going to lose what we have been building for more than sixty years now. That, of course, the European project has a lot of drawbacks and shortcomings but still there are a lot of good things about it. So how you can deliver the message that is to stop what you have already built.
EC: It’s very hard. I think that what many scholars described as the democratic deficit in Europe is not really a European thing alone. It's something that you see in a lot of other polities at the national level, disillusionment with the elites, dissatisfaction with dominant economic and cultural and social narratives. So, I think the challenge ahead is to sell the European project as something that's positive and that can provide new solutions to old problems, such as inequality such as diversity. These problems exist for long time, but the European project has a role to play in making those problems less important than they are today.

OY: How do you tilt about democracy so what role of democracy in the role of a choice in emerging teacher in Europe? We live in an age of choice? It's not possible to roll back the clock on choice. Whether we like it or not. We like to choose which toothpaste we buy we like to choose which politician represents us, and that's very much your legacy of the social transformations of the 1950s and 60s. I don't think it's possible to go backwards, so I think that now what we need to think about is what kind of choice. We make and what the consequences of those choices on and the current election campaign in France is raising a load of those issues for a concrete key because the French are very attached to put its good choice and have been for more than two centuries, but they are being confronted vary directly with the problem of.

OY: You talked about democracy, so what is the role of democracy, the role of choice, in the emerging future in Europe?

EC: We live in an age of choice. It is not possible to roll back the clock on choice. Whether we like it or not we like choose which toothpaste we buy, we like to choose which politician represents us. That’s very much a legacy of the social democratic transformations of the 1950s and 60s. I don’t think it’s possible to go backwards. So, I think that now what we need to think about is what kind of choice we make and what the consequences of those choices are. And the current election campaign in France is raising a lot of those issues very concretely because the French are very attached to political choice and have been for more than two centuries, but they are being confronted very directly with the problem of what the consequences would be for themselves and for Europe if they make what I would consider to be the wrong decision, and that is to elect Marine le Pen to the presidency.

OY: OK, let me continue with the role of choice. If we go beyond elections, how do you see the role of choice in terms of people’s ability to actually impact the future, the emergence of future, beyond elections, beyond the politics as the main source of choice?

EC: I think the conception of choice that emerged from neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s was a very individualized form of choice. It was about choosing what sorts of clothes you wore, what sorts of relationships you had, and what sorts of products you consumed. That conception of choice doesn't lend itself very well to the construction of positive political platforms. So, I wouldn't say that we need to get rid of all that choice, but I think you're starting off to build a positive political platform. So, the issue for me is thinking about okay choice, but we got to make the choice together, not simply make the choice alone. We have to make choices about our collective futures, not just about time individual futures.
OY: How is it possible to get there? To make people to come to the point where they are able to make this collective decision and have the imagination of their common future and actually go there?

EC: It's very hard because it takes a combination of political will – that is political will on the part of a particular group – and it takes a great deal of patience and again the doctrine of choice that we live in today is not one that lends itself to patience. We want to be able to get something now. We want to be able to order a product quickly online we also want our politicians to fix our problems very quickly, and I think we've lost patience. So, part of the reassessment of what we mean by choice is also about thinking about developing that patience. Concretely, it requires old-fashioned mobilization and an organization. Those are things that have been going on for a long time, and it needs a renewal of that, and it’s there, you can see some of these social movements emerging and you can see that some of them are vibrant, some of them have potential to transform the way European politics work, so I’m not necessarily pessimistic about the future. I just find it difficult to see what it might be.

OY: Tell us a little bit about French politics, what is going on right now? It in the spotlight right now after what happened in the States everybody is just what is going to happen in France. And, as you see in the now, everything seems so possible that the world is really worried about le Pen.

EC: Yeah, I mean, France is France. And when I say that I mean that in a very historical sense. The French are very parochial about that politics. I have my doubts about the impact of Brexit or of Trump or of Geert Wilders in in the Netherlands on the French political scene. I don’t think that’s what's driving the disillusionment all the enthusiasm for le Pen that we are seeing. If I make a prediction, I’ll get it wrong, so I don’t want to do that, but I think two things are really striking about this campaign. One is the strengthening and the normalization of le Front National and le Front Nationals candidates, in this case Marine le Pen, within the French political scene. And that normalization has been taking place for 30 years I think that we have reached a point at which le Front National does play a substantial role in politics. I do believe that le Front National is weaker than people make out and in particular because it is entirely dependent elections. Between elections there is essentially nothing. There are very few elected officials who carry le Front National banner, and there is no real social movement behind le Front National, so it relies wholly on elections and it stands or falls on that. So that is very interesting. A the same there has been a consolidation of a certain kind of liberal centrism, and we haven’t seen that in French politics I think since the 1970s. So, there is a return also of a kind of consensus politics, which is something I look at in my own work, and I think it’s quite important in French politics. So, in that sense, it’s a fairly conventional struggle between radical politics and consensus politics which is one of the great defining features of modern French political culture. So, it does look very uncertain, but I don’t think it’s unprecedented.

OY: In what kind of Europe would you like to live in a future?
EC: I don't know whether my opinion on my vision of Europeans is terribly important, but –

OY: It is – every single opinion is important because that’s what actually at one point set a precedent. Thinking about a future having this dream and then multiple people are going to have their dreams and it’s going to create a collective vision and then people are going to make it happen. So that’s important.

EC: You’re right, and I suppose I’m a scholar of politics, I know that the dreams you have, they really matter. I’m not one of those political scientists who thinks that everything is a rational choice, as there are a lot of other things going on to – my vision of Europe for the future is as a continent that is able to think through its own past. Starting with Europe’s past. The calamity of the 20th century, the collapse of Western civilization, and the violence that came with it. My Europe is a Europe that is representative, that is democratic, and that is secular – which is not something that is necessary shared everywhere in Europe. And my vision of Europe is also as a political entity that can mediate between nation states and sub-national units, regional units. I see a bright future for what political scientists call multi-level governance. I think this is not these are not contradictory things to have different forms of legislation at different levels, but I think that it's very hard – and the European Union is a clear example of this – it is very hard to create the identification sense of belonging with the with the supranational unit. So, I think it has to be a positive vision of Europe, and as I said, one which embodies very much certain core values. Whether those are secular values, whether those are democratic values, whether those are green environmental values, whether those are values which have to do with human rights which, again, we can talk about human rights as a good paradigm, a useful one, but the fact remains it's a paradigm we’re working with now. And I think that we should find ways to defend it. So, Europe has that role for me, and that’s what I would like Europe to be. But it has to be flexible enough to accommodate dissatisfaction and to accommodate outright hostility. And what worries me about Brexit is that we are seeing the detachment of a part of Europe rather than the adaptation of the European project around that particular case. I'm not arguing for special circumstances for Britain, but I do think that is very sad that Britain and the British generally don't feel this a place for them in this emerging European story.

OY: How do you think it is basically going to affect the European Union in a more long-term perspective? You know, this detachment. So, we cannot do anything about it really about it right now but it has a huge impact on Europe and the European Union, so if you look at the long-term perspective, how do you see it?

EC: I tend to be less pessimistic than others, so I think that it may have a strengthening effect on certain European institutions and a sort of sense of European identity. The precedent for me is the debt crisis in in Greece. What struck me about the debt crisis was not that Greece almost fell out of the Eurozone, but that core European countries – above all Germany – were willing to spend a very, very large amounts of money to keep Greece within a political project. And that suggested to me that there’s quite of residual strength in the European project. And I think Brexit will have the same effect of making Europeans think again about what actually unites them. And this may actually come out very concretely in the negotiations with Britain, so it’s
been very interesting to follow those because where Britain positions itself, and then how negotiators are forced define what they think Europe is and what they think Britain is leaving will give us a much clearer idea of where Europe might go.

OY: Is there anything that I didn’t ask you about that you would have thoughts you want to share about the future of Europe, about the trends that emerging in Europe right now in France, in Britain?

EC: Well, I think the only thing I want to say a little bit more about is young people because the future is always with young people by definition, but I think that this generation, the generation that has come of age around the time of the financial crisis, will have a very different perspective on the future to previous generations. And I count myself among them, I’m not old but I count myself amongst that older generation. I think that the kinds of social movements, the kinds of protests, the kinds of mobilization that we’re seeing now may well have the same long-term impacts of the protest the end of the late 1960s did across the world. We’re not going to see it now, it’s going to take 15-20 years to see that, but I am fairly certain that core issues are going to become more and more important in future years and that’s something I would really want to follow and I’m very interested in.