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The Sliding of Signifieds

Lacan, Artificial Intelligence,
and the Question of Europe's Vision

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Table of Contents

I. The Signifier Above the Signified	3
II. Living in the Semblance of Effects.....	3
III. The Loss of Space and Time	4
IV. Everything Is Narrative - or Vision.....	4
V. The Contest of Anchoring Points ("Point de capiton")	5
VI. A European Vision - Reflexive Rather Than Total.....	5
VII. How Can One Avoid Being at the Mercy of Others?	6
VIII. Three Fields, One Interrelationship	8
___ A. Technological Sovereignty.....	9
___ B. Education: Judgment Rather Than Possession of Knowledge.....	10
___ C. Lived Pluralism as a Counter-Narrative	13
IX. Conclusion	14

I. The Signifier Above the Signified

Jacques Lacan radically inverted Ferdinand de Saussure's model of language. For Saussure, the signifier (sound-image, sign) and the signified (meaning, concept) form a relatively stable unity - like the two sides of a sheet of paper. Lacan cuts this sheet apart. In his famous formula, he places the signifier *above* the signified (S/s), separated by a bar that marks not connection but resistance. Strictly speaking, however, it is not the signifier that slides, but the signified: Lacan literally speaks of the "glissement du signifié sous le signifiant" - the sliding of the signified beneath the signifier. Meaning slips ceaselessly beneath the chain of signifiers without ever attaching itself firmly to any one of them. Remarkably, Lacan's own schema also permits the reverse: he speaks of "perpétuels glissements du signifié sous le signifiant et l'inverse" - of perpetual sliding in both directions. Ultimately, the order makes no difference to the result: whether one lets the signified slide beneath the signifier or, conversely, the signifier over the signified, what matters is that the two never coincide. Meaning does not arise from the reference of a word to a thing, but solely from the differential relations among signifiers - a sign means only because it is *not* the other signs.

This has a radical consequence: there is no signified that brings the flow of signifiers to a final halt. Meaning is always fixed only provisionally, at so-called *points de capiton* - "quilting points"¹, like the stitches that hold upholstery together without stopping the movement of the fabric around them. Because the term "quilting point" is not self-explanatory in English either, the following discussion will instead use "anchoring point" - exactly the same thing is meant: a point at which the sliding of meaning is provisionally arrested. For Lacan, the "essence of things," the thing-in-itself, shifts into the realm of the *Real* - the register that fundamentally eludes symbolization, and thus language. We have only the chain of signifiers, never the thing itself. Every meaning is an effect of difference, not a substance.

II. Living in the Semblance of Effects

Precisely this structure acquires unexpected relevance in the age of artificial intelligence - not as an abstract theory of language, but as a diagnosis of our epistemic condition. Today, when literally all the world's knowledge is available in fractions of a second, it is paradoxically not the lack of information that disappears, but the need to penetrate to the essence of things. It is enough to live with the *effects* of things - with their descriptions, summaries, simulations, and answers. One no longer has to understand a system; one only has to know what it does and what effects it produces. Appearance - what appears, what works, what can

¹ The term comes from Lacan's Seminar III (Les psychoses [The Psychoses], 1955-56), where he introduces it in connection with psychosis and the relationship between signifier and signified.

be retrieved - fully takes the place of that for which appearance was once merely an indication.

This is the Lacanian structure in its purest form: an endless chain of signifiers (search results, generated texts, summaries, AI answers) sliding over one another without any signified appearing anywhere to halt the process. We surf across the surface of knowledge without ever touching the Real, which - in the fully Lacanian sense - could never be grasped in any case. The difference is that this structure now concerns not only language, but the entire way in which we appropriate knowledge, history, and reality.

III. The Loss of Space and Time

With this shift comes a loss that can likewise be read in Lacanian terms: the loss of space and time as dimensions of knowledge. Knowledge was once tied to a place (a library, an archive, a teacher, a journey) and to a time (slow study, the maturation of a thought, remembering as a process). Both collapse when every piece of information is available simultaneously and from anywhere. AI knows no "then" and no "there" - it knows only the current query. The past is not erased by this, but its status changes: it is no longer something one lives through or painstakingly reconstructs, but merely a retrievable narrative, one of many possible versions that could just as easily sound different. Memory becomes a data query; history, a narrative option.

Here, too, the sliding of the signifier becomes apparent: if the past itself is only one narrative among others, then there is no signified called "past" that anchors the narratives - only further narratives strung together. What once possessed a core of reality as "what actually happened" becomes an endlessly reproducible version, a vision.

IV. Everything Is Narrative - or Vision

The circle is thus complete: if the essence of things disappears into the Real, if we can make do with the appearance of their effects, if the past becomes narrative - then in the end only narrative itself remains, or what Lacan calls the *Imaginary*: the image, the vision, the fantasy that conceals the lack at the center of our knowledge. At dizzying speed, AI produces precisely such narratives and visions - coherent, plausible, persuasive surfaces beneath which there is no longer any fixed signified, only the next layer of text.

The real insight Lacan offers our age is therefore not a nostalgic lament over the loss of "truth." It is the sober recognition that the signifier was never anything other than a sliding

movement - and that AI does not invent this structure, but merely makes it visible and universal. The task, then, is not to return to the lost essence of things, but to remain conscious of the movement of sliding - and not to surrender to the machine the anchoring points that give each of us meaning and the capacity for judgment.

V. The Contest of Anchoring Points (“Point de capiton”)

This individual task has a social and geopolitical counterpart that could hardly be more urgent at present. What the anchoring point is for the individual subject, securing meaning and judgment, the political master narrative is for a collective - the authority that tells a society where the sliding of meanings provisionally comes to rest. Viewed through this lens, the current world situation reveals a pattern: the major systems now competing for influence each offer a firmly established, immovable anchoring point - a leader figure, a national or religious myth, a party master narrative that tolerates no dissent. These systems differ fundamentally in their values and in the costs they impose on individual freedom, but they share a structural feature: they answer the question of meaning instead of leaving it open.

Europe, shaped by 2,500 years of an intellectual tradition that has cultivated precisely the opposite - the institutionalized provisionality of truth, the separation of powers, methodical doubt, the individual conscience from which heroic myths arose - is structurally disadvantaged by comparison. A system committed to the revisability of its own truths can, by definition, offer no narrative as closed and mobilizing as a system that declares one truth final. What appears to be a weakness is in fact the core program of the Enlightenment - but it creates vulnerability to actors who interpret and exploit precisely this openness as incapacity for action and lack of vision. The question ahead is whether we are now entering an era in which the supposed weakness also becomes a real one.

VI. A European Vision - Reflexive Rather Than Total

What might a European vision look like that escapes this trap without lapsing into helpless uncertainty? The crucial insight is that Europe's true historical invention was never a particular substantive answer, but a procedural form: the right to doubt as a political principle. From the Socratic question through Roman law, the medieval university, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the proclamation of human rights after 1945, the protests of 1968, and the nonviolent revolt against the morally and economically bankrupt East German regime, a common thread runs throughout - not the claim to possess the truth, but the systemic protection of doubt toward every asserted truth.

A European vision for the age of AI could therefore confidently make precisely this reflexive character its message instead of concealing it as a weakness: Europe as the place where the sliding of the signifier is not repressed, but institutionally acknowledged and protected through anchoring points - through the separation of powers, a free press, academic freedom, and data protection as an expression of the dignity of the subject. Not a better master narrative in the competition among master narratives, but a conscious refusal of the temptation to begin one at all. Paradoxically enough, this stance is itself a vision - but a second-order vision.

In concrete terms, this could be conceived in several fields:

- **Technological sovereignty.** If the anchoring points of the AI era - the models, infrastructure, data, and platforms - are set exclusively outside Europe, the reflexive vision remains without consequence. A society that does not want to surrender its judgment to the machine also needs the technological capacity to help shape that machine instead of merely consuming it. This will be the greatest challenge, because returning to the forefront of this development will require considerable effort from society as a whole.
- **Education for judgment rather than the acquisition of knowledge.** When knowledge is available everywhere, the decisive competence shifts from possessing information to critically examining its origin and validity. That would be the direct educational consequence of the sliding of the signifier.
- **Lived pluralism as a counterexample.** The European Union, as functioning proof that diversity need not mean incapacity for action, would itself be the strongest message to a world that believes it must choose among closed systems.

VII. How Can One Avoid Being at the Mercy of Others?

An important distinction is often blurred here: the narrative level (the mobilizing story) and the material level (infrastructure, defense capability, and economic and technological resilience). A reflexive vision without material support remains ineffective; material strength without a unifying narrative remains directionless. Europe's real challenge is probably that it must build both at the same time, while competing systems have each had to optimize only one - either a powerful narrative or a strong concentration of power - because they never had to defend pluralism, with its costs in time, consensus, and compromise, in the first place.

The Pincer Effect: Social Spending, Educational Misalignment, Infrastructure, and Productivity

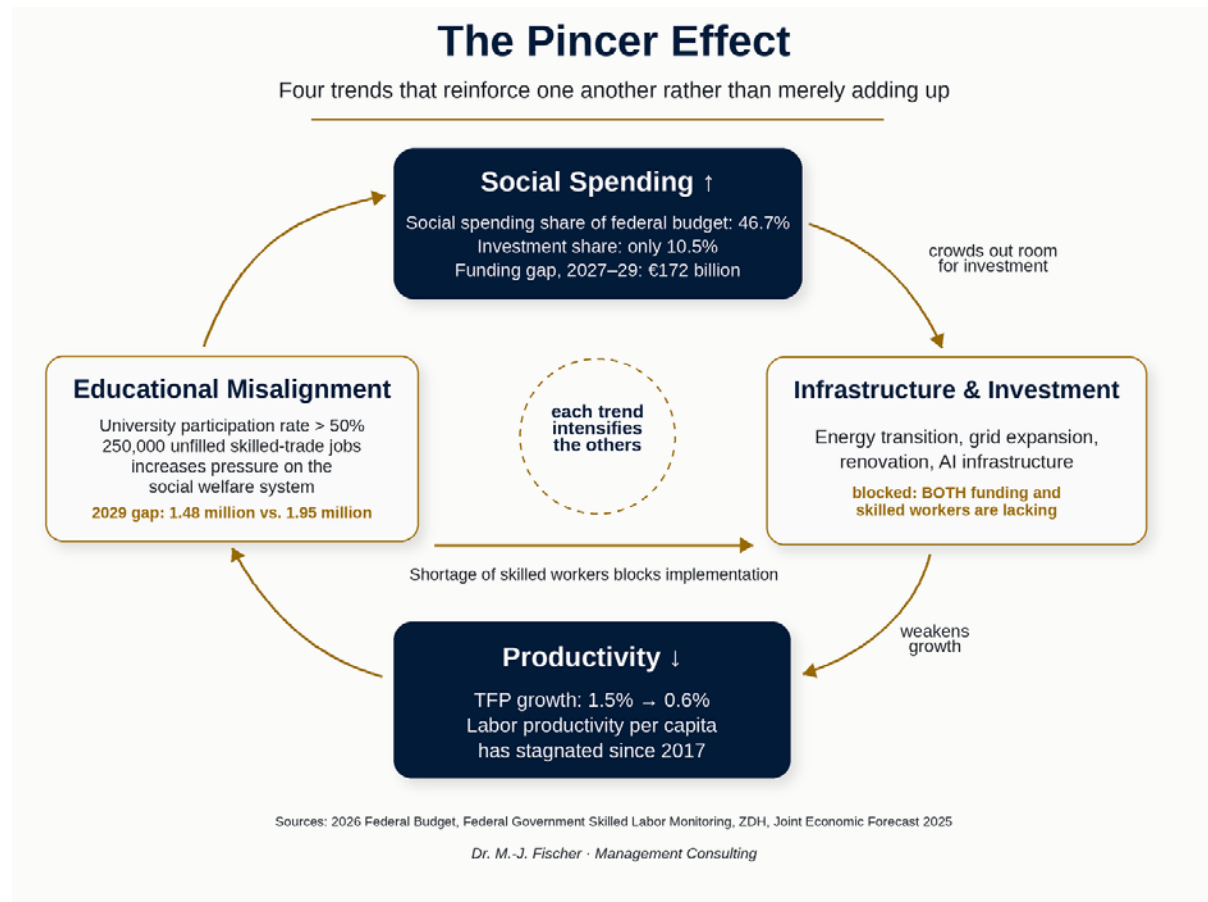
How narrow the margin on this material level actually is becomes clear from four interlocking trends in Germany. First, social spending: in 2026, social expenditures account for 46.7 percent of the federal budget - at €245.1 billion, "Social Security, Family and Youth, Labor Market Policy" is by far the largest category of expenditure. The total social budget across all levels of government reached approximately €1.345 trillion in 2024, equivalent to 31.2 percent of GDP. By contrast, federal investment accounts for only 10.5 percent of the budget; a funding gap of €172 billion is already projected for 2027-2029.

Second, educational misalignment: the university participation rate exceeds 50 percent, while approximately 250,000 skilled-trade positions remain unfilled and some 20,000 apprenticeship positions in the trades attract no applicants each year. Skilled-trade vacancies take an average of 224 days to fill - twice as long as in 2015. According to the federal government's skilled-labor monitoring, 2.48 million skilled positions will have to be filled by 2029, but only 1.95 million people with the corresponding vocational qualifications will be available.

Third, productivity: growth in total factor productivity has fallen from an average of 1.5 percent before German reunification to 0.6 percent since then, while labor productivity per capita has stagnated since 2017.

These three trends do not simply add up; they reinforce one another into a pincer. Social spending on this scale structurally crowds out room for investment, not because of a lack of political will, but because the budget scarcely permits otherwise. Even where funding were available, it would run into a bottleneck: the energy transition, grid expansion, renovation, and the development of digital infrastructure are also physical construction projects that require trained tradespeople, not capital alone - and twenty years of pressure toward academic education have thinned out precisely the occupational groups needed to implement this transformation. This is a capacity problem, not merely a financing problem. Stagnating productivity, in turn, weakens the tax base that is supposed to support growing social spending, structurally widening the gap between expenditure growth and revenue growth. More social spending requires more growth to finance it; growth requires investment and infrastructure; infrastructure requires skilled workers whom the educational priorities of the past two decades have failed to produce; and the resulting drag on productivity, in turn, weakens the capacity to sustain social spending at all. Each trend aggravates the others. This pincer contains the material core of what Chapter VI described as a reflexive vision: a society that wants to defend its institutional openness can do so only if it

also preserves the material means to sustain it - and these four trends show that this is not currently assured.



The Lacanian point remains intact and at the same time indicates a way out: the answer cannot be to establish a totalizing anchoring point of one's own in order to compete in the contest of master narratives - that would mean relinquishing precisely what is to be defended. Europe's task lies instead in articulating its own incompleteness offensively and confidently as a strength, while securing the technological, institutional, and military means that make it viable. Not the end of sliding, but the self-determined shaping of its conditions would be the genuinely European response to the age of AI.

VIII. Three Fields, One Interrelationship

The three fields named above are not an additive list of arbitrary policy areas; they interlock like the three registers Lacan himself distinguishes: the Symbolic (the order of signs and institutions), the Imaginary (the images and identifications that hold a society together), and the Real (the material infrastructure against which every narrative must prove itself). Technological sovereignty and strength form the real, material foundation. Education for judgment is the symbolic capacity to deal sovereignly with sliding signifiers in the first place.

Lived pluralism is the imaginary surface of identification - the image Europe forms of itself and projects outward. If one of the three registers is missing, the whole remains unstable: sovereignty without judgment produces mere isolation, judgment without sovereignty remains inconsequential criticism, and pluralism without either becomes an empty formula.

A. Technological Sovereignty

The core of the problem is easy to state: if the large language models, cloud infrastructure, semiconductor manufacturing, and platforms through which European citizens, public administrations, and companies communicate are controlled predominantly outside Europe, then Europe does not set the anchoring points of its own digital reality - it adopts them. This concerns not only economic value creation, but exactly the question with which this essay began: Who determines which answers are considered plausible, which sources trustworthy, and which connections relevant?

Several concrete points of departure can be distinguished. They already exist in embryonic form in Europe, but so far lack critical mass:

- **Computing infrastructure and chips.** Initiatives such as European chip manufacturing (including the establishment of foundries) and shared data-center capacity are prerequisites for training European AI models at all without dependence on non-European cloud providers. Without a hardware base of its own, any claim to software sovereignty remains lip service.
- **European models and open standards.** European AI companies demonstrate that powerful models can also be developed outside the U.S. and Chinese hyperscalers. The decisive question is less whether a European model “wins” a benchmark than whether it is created under a European framework for data, fundamental rights, and transparency - and thus under different boundary conditions for what counts as a plausible answer.
- **Data law as an exportable standard.** The European General Data Protection Regulation is often perceived solely as a burden on businesses. In fact, it is one of the few areas in which Europe already sets global standards rather than adopting them. This normative strength could be understood and developed more deliberately as part of digital sovereignty, for example in AI regulation.
- **Alliance-building rather than autarky.** Complete technological independence is neither realistic nor desirable. What is realistic is diversification of dependencies - several partners instead of a single one - combined with core capabilities of Europe's own in the areas that are especially sensitive for democratic decision-making (elections, public administration, critical infrastructure, education).

Critics of the view that the GDPR is primarily a normative strength counter that it could prove to be a competitive disadvantage. If data protection prevents control systems from operating on a sufficient data basis, makes it impossible to analyze consumer behavior at the necessary depth, and thereby reduces the efficiency with which production and resources can be managed, the protection in practice works against the interests of those it is intended to benefit. The argument continues that excessive data-protection requirements also impede law enforcement. On this reading, the United States, China, and presumably large parts of Asia are already ahead of Europe in this regard.

On closer examination, however, this assessment requires differentiation. First, law enforcement in the EU is not governed by the GDPR at all, but by a separate and significantly less restrictive legal framework; a direct connection between the GDPR and failures to bring offenders to justice therefore cannot be asserted in such sweeping terms. Second, China itself introduced the PIPL in 2021, a data-protection law that is even stricter than the GDPR in certain respects. The decisive difference thus lies less in the level of data protection imposed on companies than in the fact that the Chinese state reserves extensive exemptions from these rules for itself, whereas in Europe governmental use of data also remains bound by the rule of law. The United States, meanwhile, owes its supposed advantage primarily to the absence of a uniform federal consumer-data-protection statute - a regulatory vacuum that is increasingly being filled there as well by state laws.

Whether lowering Europe's level of data protection would actually produce more efficient governance or more effective law enforcement, or whether the real efficiency losses have other causes - such as fragmented implementation across 27 member states or inconsistent supervisory practice - therefore remains an open question that has not been conclusively resolved empirically.

The cost must be stated openly: these investments are expensive, slow, and lag behind the pace of innovation of the major platforms. The debate over whether Europe can realistically catch up in this area or should concentrate on regulatory rather than technological leadership remains open among experts and is by no means settled.

B. Education: Judgment Rather Than Possession of Knowledge

Once knowledge itself has become a commodity available for retrieval at any time, the classical educational task - transmitting and testing knowledge - loses importance relative to another, historically older task: the ability to form a judgment, weigh sources, tolerate contradictions, and defend one's own conclusions even against the current of a convincingly phrased AI answer. At its core, this is the Socratic method - questioning as an end in itself,

not as a means to a quick answer - and Europe possesses in it a 2,500-year-old educational tradition that assumes new urgency in the age of AI.

Possible points of departure:

- **Source literacy and AI literacy as a core subject.** The crucial element is not how to operate AI tools, but understanding how a language model arrives at its answers - that it calculates probabilities across sequences of words and does not test truth. This belongs at the core of school education, much as the ability to distinguish a newspaper argument from an advertisement once did.
- **Strengthening the humanities and philosophical education.** Subjects traditionally regarded as “unproductive” - philosophy, history, cultures - paradoxically acquire greater economic relevance when technical knowledge production is automated. The scarce resource will not be knowledge, but the ability to place it in context.
- **University reform toward the capacity for discourse.** Examination formats based on reproducing retrievable knowledge lose their purpose when any AI can reproduce that knowledge better than students can. Formats that require judgment, oral defense of positions, and interdisciplinary thinking beyond ideological preconceptions gain importance.
- **Lifelong learning as a democratic responsibility,** not merely as labor-market policy - precisely because the conditions of knowledge production are changing so rapidly that adults, too, must continuously update their capacity for judgment rather than acquire it only once at school or university.

This consideration takes on additional urgency when technological development is thought through to its conclusion: if AI systems assume a growing share of organizational and administrative work in the coming years, and robotics increasingly replaces even simple industrial production work, the unavoidable question is what the human resources thereby released will be needed for in the future - and how a society will deal with those whose previous activities disappear. One possible approach, widely discussed in education and social policy, would be a consistently education-oriented course that also imposes educational obligations: instead of distributing family and social benefits indiscriminately, they would be tied to the actual achievement of defined educational goals - with the consequence that a portion of the population that fails to meet these obligations would become more detached from publicly financed benefits.

Such a change of course in Germany would, however, be not only a political question but also a constitutional one. In its 2010 Hartz IV ruling, the Federal Constitutional Court derived

from the guarantee of human dignity (Article 1 of the Basic Law), in conjunction with the social-state principle (Article 20 of the Basic Law), a right to a subsistence minimum consistent with human dignity that may not be made conditional; the subsequent 2019 decision also significantly limited the possibility of reducing benefits as a sanction. A strict linkage of social benefits to mandatory educational participation - especially where it affects children, who are not themselves responsible for their parents' educational decisions - would therefore in all likelihood have to be assessed specifically against this case law and would very probably require correction in part. In legal-theoretical terms, this case law is by no means positivist - on the contrary, it deliberately understands human dignity as an inalienable value that precedes the state and to which the legislature itself must submit, thereby explicitly opposing a merely formal validity of law. The real question is therefore not whether the Court judges on the basis of values, but to which value it commits itself - and whether that commitment should remain so absolute that it cannot in principle be balanced against strategic considerations such as technological competitiveness.

Supporters of an approach that makes educational participation obligatory argue that a society seeking to compete in the global technological arena cannot afford to grant transfer payments irrespective of reciprocal contribution and future viability, and that genuine equality of opportunity consists precisely in continuing educational investment rather than unconditional redistribution. Critics, by contrast, warn that such conditionality would increase rather than reduce the risk of permanently detaching entire population groups, and that the resulting social division could itself produce the instabilities that technological competitiveness is intended to help avoid. This question, too, cannot therefore be answered conclusively; it can only be identified as one of the central political choices European societies will face in the age of AI.

This debate thus touches the core of the entire essay once more from another angle. The question whether fundamental rights should be treated as absolute anchoring points that in principle cannot be balanced against strategic considerations, or whether they too - like every other signifier - should be subject to sliding and renegotiated according to context, may be the decisive question for Europe's success in the coming decades. In its jurisprudence on human dignity, the Federal Constitutional Court has chosen the first position: an anchoring point that holds precisely because it does not shift along with the conditions around it - a deliberate refusal of sliding at exactly the point where individual dignity stands. Those who wish to loosen this commitment argue, at bottom, that this point is itself once again a historically developed anchoring point - a postwar settlement that must be reexamined under the conditions of a new technological and geopolitical competitive environment, like any other social agreement.

This reveals the true scope of the initial question: Europe's self-understanding consists precisely in deliberately withdrawing certain anchoring points - above all, the dignity of the individual - from the competition among narratives, while competing systems treat precisely this fixation as an obsolete luxury they no longer wish to afford in global competition. Whether Europe understands this non-negotiability as its actual strength - the one point at which it refuses to submit to mere efficiency thinking - or as its decisive weakness in global competition is ultimately the most political of all the questions this essay raises. In the coming decades, it will be decided not in theory, but in very concrete budgetary, educational, and social-policy choices.

The same applies here: education reform in Europe has traditionally been the responsibility of member states or even regions, which makes coherence difficult. Whether European coordination would be useful in this area, or whether the diversity of educational systems is itself a value that should not be standardized too hastily, is a legitimate and controversial question in education policy.

C. Lived Pluralism as a Counter-Narrative

The third point is the most demanding because it cannot be produced by investment or curriculum alone, but must be demonstrated through everyday institutional practice. The claim that pluralism is capable of action is convincing only if it can be shown empirically - in a functioning rule of law, in the protection of minorities, and in the ability to make common decisions despite differing national interests.

Concrete points of departure:

- **Consistent rule-of-law mechanisms.** If individual member states violate rule-of-law principles without the Union being able to respond effectively, this undermines the credibility of the argument for pluralism both internally and externally. Strengthening such mechanisms is directly tied to the vision itself, not merely a technical administrative matter.
- **A European public sphere.** To date, there are few transnational media outlets and scarcely any truly shared space for political discourse; political debates remain framed predominantly in national terms. Formats such as cross-border citizens' assemblies or a more Europeanized campaign for the European Parliament could provide a starting point without flattening national diversity.
- **Subsidiarity as a principle, not an obstacle.** The principle of making decisions as close as possible to those affected is itself a practical translation of the Lacanian idea: meaning is not established centrally and once and for all, but remains revisable at many

points. Living this principle consistently instead of merely citing it as a formula would be the real test.

- **Resilience against disinformation without turning freedom of expression itself into an anchoring point.** The most difficult balancing act: a pluralist system must be able to defend itself against targeted disinformation campaigns by foreign systems without itself succumbing to the temptation to impose a single “official” truth. Exactly how this balance should be struck is one of the most contested political questions of the present and is answered very differently within Europe itself.

IX. Conclusion

Together, the three fields do not yield a finished program, but a direction: Europe would have to turn its own incompleteness into a conscious institution not despite AI, but precisely because of it - secured by infrastructure of its own, practiced through an education oriented toward judgment rather than possession of knowledge, and demonstrated by a pluralism that proves itself in the everyday life of institutions rather than merely being asserted in ceremonial rhetoric. Whether this will succeed remains open. The concern raised here - that Europe may fail in the competition among closed systems - must be taken seriously and cannot be argued away by invocation alone. But the Lacanian analysis at least shows where the real wager lies: not in opposing the other systems with an equally closed anchoring point of Europe's own, but in making the capacity for sliding itself - sovereign, educated, and lived pluralistically - a European strength.

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