Memory and Identity of Europe

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Abstract: How can the European Union comprehend and receive millions of persons without losing its identity? An identity that, moreover, is itself multiple, expansive, clustered. The European Community has recently been enriched by twelve new members – ten eastern and central European and two Mediterranean states. This enlargement, on the one hand, will serve to heal a historical wound, closing the rift that divided the soil of Europe with the so-called “Iron Curtain”; on the other, it will open even more intense relations with the Mediterranean. With its 470 million citizens and its extension from the Arctic Circle to Malta and from the Azores to Cyprus, the European Union now represents an economic and, potentially, a political power of the first order, also in virtue of its effort to strengthen within its borders that “meek” regime which is democracy, entering into more active relations with other parts of the world and shouldering responsibility for global crises and difficulties.

1. Europe has been called the “birthplace of memory.” The great weight of the past – the crushing inheritance of tradition and the accumulation of historical recollection – has often made Europe appear to be the “museum” of the West. While European history is in fact not as long as that of many Middle Eastern or Asian countries, this history has shaped the continent’s fundamental identity. The question now, however, is whether this memory is sufficiently shared by all its citizens, and whether Europe has the power to consolidate its enlarged political identity.

Sixty years of uninterrupted peace (in Western Europe, at least) have dimmed the memory of conflicts and reinforced the economic, political and cultural ties of long-time enemy states. Today, the “essentially volcanic nature of Europe’s soil,” of which the Italian writer Giaime Pintor spoke, does not seem to be rekindling the alarmed tensions of the past. There is certainly no lack of breeding grounds for turbulence or collisions of political interests, but it is highly unlikely that their sum can lead to armed conflict between the nations of Europe.

The European Union, composed of only six founding members when it was constituted precisely fifty-two years ago by the Treaty of Rome, is now
formed by twenty-seven nations (it has recently been enriched by twelve new states, ten eastern European and two Mediterranean). The Union is now composed of 470 million citizens and stretches from the Arctic Circle to Malta and from the Azores to Cyprus. This enlargement, on the one hand, will serve to heal a historical wound, closing the rift that divided the soil of Europe with the so-called “Iron Curtain”; on the other, it will open even more intense relations with the Mediterranean (especially with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East).

The new state of affairs has, however, given rise to many fears. The twelve new eastern and Mediterranean member states fear a rise in their cost of living, while the original fifteen fear such things as destabilizing migration flows and an increase in crime. But, here, one fails to consider the positive side of this enlargement to the East and South, which will create greater stability – a form of peace – and will prevent such drifts toward disintegration as the one we saw in the former Yugoslavia. But, then, the expansion toward the East troubles Russia, concerned about the presence of NATO troops at its borders, and troubles the United States too, due to its fear of possible political autonomy.

2. The “Iron Curtain” was only the most recent of a long series of political “faults” that have crisscrossed Europe, akin to the San Andreas fault in California; for millennia they have broken up the continent into various parts. For example, we can still find traces of the Germanic-Rhaetian limes, a sort of smaller-scale Great Wall of China that in Roman times (about eighteen centuries ago) stretched from the present Austrian-Hungarian border to the mouth of the Rhine in present-day Holland or, expressed differently, followed the present Franco-German border and then on to Bavaria and Austria, separating the two cultures (dividing – for instance – the culture of wine and olive oil from the culture of beer and butter). But this wound too has, fortunately, been healed.

We still find traces of the fault that once separated the old part of the border between the eastern and the Western Roman Empires, between the Ottoman Empire and the Hapsburg Empire (both fell at the end of World War I), which comprises the areas of Kosovo and Bosnia, precisely where the conflicts of the 1990s took place. Toward the East, in the late Middle Ages and in the early modern era the Teutonic Knights invaded Prussia and Poland: crushed, again, by a series of empires – the Russian, the Hapsburg and the German (the Second Reich) – these eastern European peoples came, justifiably, to distrust both Western Europe and Russia, and in fact today, for various reasons (their anti-communist feelings in particular) look more to the United States than to the European Union.
On the subject of European “faults” I shall limit myself to the case of Germany, because of its difficult historical relationship with the rest of Europe, and because of its crucial position today. To understand this question fully we would have to go far back in time. “Germany and Europe, a Spiritual Dissension” – the title of Benedetto Croce’s book published in 1944 – goes back to Germany’s failure to integrate itself in the area of co-existence of diverse civilizations established and ensured for centuries by the Roman Empire. After the defeat of Varus’s legions in 9 A.D., Rome in fact abandoned any plan to penetrate the areas inhabited by the Germanic tribes, seeking to separate and defend itself from them by means of its imposing Germanic-Rhaetian *limes*.

Prompted by different premises and by intuitions that were more “literary” than historical, Thomas Mann came to conclusions that partially agreed with Croce’s. He did so precisely by emphasizing the differences between Germany and the rest of Europe, and by seeking to comprehend the reasons for others’ incomprehensions. Both in the *Magic Mountain* (1924) and in the essay *Goethe and Tolstoy* (1922), Mann presents Germany as a “country in-between,” a place of friction and of mediation between the Mediterranean civilizations of the South and the West (characterized by the prevalence of urban culture, by articulate speech, and by shared political experience) and the Slavic nations of the East (spiritually marked, in his opinion, by the fascination and by the logic of great open spaces, by the nihilistic tendency toward the indistinct and sentimental, and by autocratic forms of government). At the symbolic level, for the Germans the outcome of these contrasting tendencies was, on the one hand, music, where articulate speech and open “Mediterranean” outwardness dissolve in an inner sentiment, which, however, conserves its mathematical and measurable exactness; and, on the other, a continuous oscillation between the clear and the indistinct.

3. The oft-cited unitary origin of Europe has no actual basis in fact but, if anything, represents a myth. In this respect, the very idea of Europe can constitute at most a return to the “internal use” of models and processes of self-identification that have already been elaborated for “external use” and in moments of danger. I am referring here to cases in which European territory is threatened by “external” aggression with a good chance of success. The Greek battles of Marathon and Salamis against the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids (490 and 480 B.C.) can, in this sense, be considered the official birthplaces of Europe as a political and “spiritual” entity. At these sites, according to the legend fabricated by the Greeks, the little European David, vanquishing the Asiatic Goliath, defined – through contrast, and with a number of indelible traits – its features, and began to boast of its attributes as a land of freedom,
reason, and law, in sharp contrast with Oriental despotism, sensualism, and license. Orientalism, as a projection of western prejudices, was born.

At Poitiers in 732, Charles Martel’s defeat of the Arabs, who had invaded Spain in 711, was the second important acid test, the reversal of a trend toward the contraction of the European sphere of influence and power, crowned not only by triumph in war but also by triumph in faith. The siege of Vienna by the Turks in 1683 was the scene of the last global challenge to Europe and to its Christianity on its own territory. After this date no non-European army will set foot on the continent until 1917 (when the Americans came to combat the Germans and Austrians).

Hence Europe’s spiritually undivided solidarity come to the fore when it is confronted with powerful enemies – barbarians or infidels – that embody its alleged negation. It is true that, down through the centuries, European identity has withdrawn into itself, detaching itself from these crucial events and becoming autonomous. But the fact remains that Europe was forged above all in opposition: first, in opposition to a cultured but “despotic” Asia; then, to Islam or to the peoples that continued to arrive from the steppes of central Asia (such as the Tartars and the Turks); and lastly, in the age of colonial and missionary expansion, to America, Africa and Oceania, inhabited by peoples ignorant of the true civilization and the true God, or by tribes of “savages.” Europe loved to present itself as the “homeland of spirit”: in the frescoes, mosaics and fountains that represent the continents, it was often portrayed as the goddess Minerva, symbol of the inextricable link between intelligence and power. But, today, in an age in which we wonder whether universal theories on scientific knowledge and human rights are not, indeed, one of Eurocentrism’s most refined instruments of domination, who accepts the classical equation Europe = absolute civilization = rationalism = progress = dynamism?

Nevertheless, through the sedimentation of millennia of history and of contacts between peoples, Europe has come to recognize the differences in other civilizations precisely because it contains them in itself. Its riches consist in its variety of cultures. In this sense, Paul Valéry was right when he identified the distinctive character of Europe as its capacity to absorb other civilizations and, then, to export them anew.

Europe, then, is less a geographical expression (the remnant of a promontory of Asia) or “a historical expression” than a “province of the soul,” a cultural construction that, also historically, has severed some of its “external” roots. In fact, ancient mythological tradition alludes to the partially Asiatic origin of its culture, when it recounts how “Europe” was nothing other than the name of a young Phoenician girl. Moreover, it is common knowledge that Europe has modified its frontiers over the course of time: according to Herodotus, for example, to the West it went no farther than the Adriatic Sea;
and, for centuries, the eastern border was unclear, although since the mid-eighteenth century it has conventionally been set at the Ural mountains.

Hence Europe is inscribed in an unstable geometrical space, in the sense that its own external and internal borders are set down and then removed, following the inclusion and exclusion of peoples and countries.

4. Since the fall of the Roman Empire this continent has never known any form of long-term unification. Europe is constitutively the homeland of diversity, it is made up of differences, and the goal of unifying its differences is absurd. Aiming to achieve a cultural integration – a melting pot like the one in the United States – would be ridiculous. Rather, at least for the time being, what is needed is to encourage a shared institutional framework, a constitutional patriotism, so that the new member states – along with the old ones – may follow rules that regard the principles of democracy, the expansion of human rights, and adaptation to new economic structures. The entire system should be reinforced – especially for the younger European generations – by an educational system designed to create a European citizenship, whose wealth must arise from the catalyst of differences within a shared project of growth.

Europe, today, cannot simply present itself – especially in light of its colonial past – as a “beacon,” an exporter of its own principles of freedom and democracy. The task, now, is for it to wed the demands of freedom with the demands of equality in its own countries, in order to prevent freedom from becoming a privilege in a world torn by conflicts, and to prevent equality from becoming a mere ideological pretext. If we take the year 1989 as a symbolic date, we should do so not only for the fall of the Berlin Wall but, also, for the – perhaps not definitive – failure of a great historical project, aimed at spreading equality among the citizens of Europe. This project failed because in the Socialist countries the will to achieve equality ultimately produced greater inequality; but that failure can be no justification for the development of models of so-called “wild” liberalism.

Each European country has its own history, which must interact with the history of the others. Each European citizen has her or his own characteristics, which have to be preserved at various levels: you can be a European, an Italian, you can be a Tuscan or a Neapolitan. European Union must not preclude some form of attachment to local homelands, or some localism, and by no means implies that the State, as a junction between the local and the European community, must disappear, or that “identity” be undermined.

After all, there are three types of identity in play. One is a “self-referential” identity, based on the logical scheme a=a (Spanish because Spanish, French because French), as if identity were a fact of nature. Then, by contrast,
there is an identity that consists in accepting the deformations that centuries of external and internal oppression have provoked and glorifying them as signs of authenticity. “I am like this and I am proud of it”: here, I am thinking, for instance, of the case of the Soviet Union in the twenties and thirties, with the “cult of the proletariat,” and of some African and Caribbean poets, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor or Aimé Césaire, with their idea of négritude: in saying “yes, you whites have the intelligence, but we have imagination, passion,” they failed to realize that in this way they were devaluing their own intelligence. Finally, the third type, which sees European identity as a work in progress, as a rope made up of many threads, which becomes stronger and stronger as the threads twist together.

This construction that is Europe will probably be beneficial – for example, to relations between the Greek and the Turkish communities on Cyprus, to the problem of the Hungarians in Transylvania, of the Romanians in Moldavia and, perhaps later on, of the Serbs in Croatia and, perhaps, indirectly, it will ease some of the tensions with the Russian population in the Baltic countries. But, here, what we most need to consider is the fact that the enlargement of Europe has to be seen as a great historical opportunity but, also, as an arduous task.

5. European identity – also with respect to the identities of the European states – is an identity to be constructed. Unquestionably, throughout Europe we still find underground histories, cut-off and endangered languages, rejected identities, and cultures that risk disappearing. But, against all forms of racism or of chauvinism, a distinction needs to be drawn between the rejection of any hierarchy of cultures (in the sense that each culture has a dignity of its own) and the attempts of small or large cultures to close themselves off in an exasperated presumption of autochthony. Their identity should, on the contrary, define itself not only on the basis of oppositions, but also on the basis of differences that are open to processes of universalization, to interaction with other cultures, to the elaboration of other models of belonging and of citizenship. For this reason it is necessary to support such concepts as a métissage of all mankind, reciprocal cultural pollination, and a reassessment of “differences,” and to reject the conceit of a West that proclaims itself to be the bearer of the only Civilization worthy of this name.

Let us never forget that, alas, every civilization is bound to decline and fall. As a reminder of that which Vico called “the haughtiness of nations” (the arrogance of believing themselves better than others), I would like to quote these moving words of the Chinese poet Tsao Chin (192–232 A.D.), pronounced when he returned to his city, devastated by enemies:
Building and houses, all in ashes,
Walls and fences smashed in, ruined:
Brambles and thorns rise to the sky.
No longer do I see the ancient elders
I see only the new young ones…
I think of the house where I lived so many years:
My heart is heavy, and I am unable to speak.

And yet, fortunately, human history does not stop: the cultures of the world become mixed and then revive in new and unexpected forms. We do not need to wait for the future. We can (and we must) act now, to strengthen the bonds of friendship and understanding between different civilizations. We should, whenever possible, expunge the preconceived idea of the outsider or foreigner as a potential enemy rather than a possible guest. We look at the foreigner, and a sort of strabismus sets in: at the very moment in which globalism is pressing towards universalism, a parallel drive towards isolation is on the rise. Can we find today, on an international scale, forms of hospitable, broadminded and nonfoundational, pluralistic, constantly evolving “universalism” capable of accommodating diverse cultures, rendering their differences compatible without ghettoizing them?

One thing is certain: we need to promote and to develop ways of thinking that are capable of weaving together the cord of humanity, which grows stronger the more it makes partial histories interconnect. But the very ideas of “civilization,” “humanity” and “humanism” are, today, viewed with suspicion (accused of irremediably confusing the essence of humanity with one of its particular historical forms, namely, the Judeo-Christian). The accusation is that true universalism has been replaced by a universalism imposed through centuries of violence and exploitation. The challenge is serious and calls for our courage on two fronts: on one, in the determination to consider the criticisms of other cultures and to listen to their voices; on the other, in a willingness to look into the dark side of our own European and western universalism, and ask ourselves where it may be at fault.

(Translated from the Italian by Giacomo Donis)

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