The European Archipelago. Europe between Unity and Difference

Roberto Toscano*

Our contemporary society is overly obsessed by the issue of «identity», so much so that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to avoid addressing it within the framework of any discussion related to political-institutional issues. Bending to the fashion of the day, I will try to apply this inevitable paradigm to Europe, attempting to define what is the meaning of Europe, and what «being a European» means from a cultural before than from a political point of view.

My main concern, in attempting this difficult exercise, is not that of contributing to the anguished soul-searching of Europeans themselves, recently more and more perplex in the face of bureaucratic blues and institutional blockages. I will rather refer not only to identity as perceived from the outside, but also, more substantially, to what kind of contribution could the «European spirit», if it exists, give to the world at large, to human civilisation beyond its own (rather undefined) borders.

Everybody wants into the European Union, to the extent that even the perspective of delays in the timetable for the admission to the EU can cause political crisis, offense, indignation, in the candidate countries, and even in those who would like to become candidates. Great success, therefore? One should introduce a word of caution, here. The yearning for membership can be explained by the economic advantages that are commonly associated with belonging to the Union, as well as by the legitimacy that leaders, often controversial and politically fragile, can draw from the admission to the club of rich democracies. But does this «hunger for Europe» reflect a real understanding of what Europe is, of what Europe stands for as far as values, as far as identity, are concerned? I believe that a certain margin of doubt is justified. Let me be the devil's advocate and ask: how much is EU membership a way of

* *Ambassador of Italy in Iran.*
Speech offered at the round table «On Europe's Enlightening *Example, 1957-2007. Thinking the Universal Implications of a Unique Historical Adventure», Residence of the Swiss Ambassador in Tehran, 2 July 2007.*

joining not so much Europe, but rather that «West» which, though theoretically vanished after the political and strategic demise of the Communist East, is still a strong ideological point of reference? A West in which many candidates, as well as not few new members, still predominantly recognise, refer to, and identify with, the American rather than the European component.

But let us move away from what are the different components (West, Center, and East) of the North, and let us move to the South. What is the perception of Europe that characterises that part of the world? Here the situation becomes even more complex, and sometimes frankly discouraging for us Europeans. I am of course referring to the persistent grievances for the centuries of colonialism. Grievances that, let me say, are historically justified, but at the same time are the last refuge of the local political scoundrel, very skillful in dumping on the past, and on the colonial Other, all the shortcomings, the mistakes and the crimes that are very much present, very much national, indigenous.

The accusation and the rejection, however, are not only retrospective, historical. As Europeans we are being daily reproached for being «Eurocentric», i.e. for having arbitrarily clothed in universalist garb our own specific, partial, relative values, often just a disguise for our very concrete interests. The charge is constant, sometimes violent: Europeans are being accused of self-serving rhetoric, of double standards, especially in the extremely sensitive subject of human rights.

While recognising that these suspicions, accusations and grievances are generally not unfounded, or not totally unfounded, I will try to muster some arguments of an «apology for Europe». I will try to say that there is, indeed, a specific European essence and that it is one that deserves not only to be preserved but to be offered – though not imposed – as a contribution to the development of a common human civilisation.

Europe is not just economic prosperity, and the process of European integration has been successful not only because of original institutional solutions, but because it was founded on true commonalities, on a cultural specificity that was re-discovered and dug out from under the rubble of World War II.

Let me try to list some of these commonalities, of these cultural specificities of Europe and Europeans.

1. Rescuing History from Memory

Of a part of Europe, the Balkans, it was once said that it produced more history than it could consume. Let me say that the same could be said of Europe at large, but with a slight change in terminology. Europe has been producing more memory than it could consume. Contrary to history, which can be controversial but not necessarily polemical and conflict-generating, memories in Europe have been the source of hatreds and conflicts that were definitely neither «natural» nor «inevitable», but the product of ideology. Not any ideology, but nationalist ideology that took shape mainly in the course of the 19th century. Reading not only history books, but memoirs and travel narrations of pre-19th-century Europe, one is struck by the relative importance of borders, by the lack of sharp national distinctions. Ideas traveled irrespective of borders: Erasmus of Rotterdam had more followers in Spain than in the Netherlands (and it is quite proper that the program for the exchange of university students within the EU was baptised «Erasmus»). Lombard bankers freely operated in London, without any exchange control. Of course there must be no nostalgia for these pre-national times. No nostalgia for the transnational domination of Church and Empire, often detrimental to individual freedoms and group rights. And yet Europe today has re-discovered and recovered these civilisational modes in a democratic, pluralistic framework, not abolishing frontiers but making them transparent. Not ignoring traditions and cultures of its member states, but multiplying their links, their exchanges. And at the same time, trying to overcome the ominous heritage of contrasting memories: a heritage of accumulated perceived wrongs, of constantly and dramatically recalled victimisation (and systematic denial of one's role as victimiser), of unjust defeats at the hand of devious foes and triumphant victories. The stuff that the now embarrassing texts of national anthems are usually made of. Actually, national pride does not need myths and lies: there is plenty of legitimate glory for everyone in a

non-partisan reading of European history once we abandon the comforting but dangerous myths of memory.

2. Beyond Assimilation and Multiculturalism: For European Interculturalism

One of the biggest challenges of globalisation is, of course, how to live with difference. Difference that is no longer coinciding with a well-designed map of different colors, with neatly drawn borders, but irreversibly penetrates our land, our cities and even villages, our daily lives. In general it turns out that we were not equipped to cope with it. And yet Europe has been historically more equipped, relatively, than other parts of the world to address difference, for the very reason that it was itself, it is, difference.

Definitely, the answers that Europe has historically given to this challenge have been tentative, often mistaken. It is wrong to think that difference can be reabsorbed through assimilation: in the first place, people usually do not want to be assimilated; secondly, assimilationist ideology hides a profound fraud, insofar as it tries to sell a specific cultural option, a specific way of being human, under the false pretense of the «Universal Man». As Tzvetan Todorov has written: «L'universalisté est, trop souvent, un ethnocentriste que s'ignore». Just as wrong is the multiculturalist option, insofar as «separate but equal» is a racist slogan (invented in the South of the US in the 1950's to fight integration) and, more serious still, the pluralism of separate communities produces two very dangerous phenomena: the creation of ghettos where ignorance and hatred of the Other fester and the deliverance of individuals to the usually non-democratic rule of local community leaders, be they religious or political.

But Europe, again going back to its deepest sources, to its own history, is more and more discovering that the right way of addressing difference is interculturalism. Interculturalism means neither assimilation nor multiculturalism. Interculturalism accepts that each culture is not readable in essentialist terms, but it is historically the product of a meeting and blending, and often tension, among different cultures of different origins. Only ideology, nationalist ideology, can try to

deny – on demonstrably shaky, preposterous foundations – this truth. Italians are not just the descendants of the ancient Romans, the French are not just descendants of the Gauls, Iranians are not just Aryans. Nor are their cultures or languages to be interpreted in a linear, «pure» fashion. Each culture is intercultural. The young people of Europe, while remaining French, Italian, Spanish, etc., are re-discovering, without difficulty, naturally, this deep and deeply denied truth. A truth that can help not only the peoples of Europe, but the peoples of the whole world, live together on the basis of historical and cultural truths, instead of ignoring and hating each other on the basis of historical and cultural lies.

3. The Acceptance of Change

In a world that is characterised by a widespread fear of losing one's identity (both individual and collective) under the steamroller of globalisation, one can draw a comforting lesson from the European experience, from the European way. If one thing has characterised Europe, it has been change. Difficult change, painful change, controversial change, but change. And one that has not entailed the abolition of differences. Europeans are not *idem*, not even compared to a few years back, but are definitely *ipse*, i.e. they are «themselves», though «new themselves». Thinking that one can preserve one's own identity by rejecting change (often the desperate illusion of the weak) is a recipe for frustration, tragedy, violence. Europe can show an alternative.

4. Learning Humility

The arrogance of the Western man is definitely not an invention of third-world radical politicians. It is an arrogance that found its most grotesque, and also its most ethically repugnant, version during the colonial period. This is how Riszard Kapuscinski, quoted in the book a great European intellectual, Zygmunt Bauman, very effectively put it: «It was enough just to be European to feel like a boss and a ruler everywhere else. Even a mediocre person of humble standing

and held in low esteem in his own small and insignificant (but European!) country rose to the highest social positions once he had landed in Malaysia or Zambia» (Zygmunt Bauman, *Europe, an Unfinished Adventure*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, p. 29).

It is a kind of arrogance that unfortunately has a tendency to re-emerge, given adequate circumstances. And yet Europe, drawing from its own deep moral traditions – both religious and non-religious, with roots both in Christianity and in the Enlightenment – has been learning how to practice humility. It would be extremely difficult to find in the new European generation traces of that colonial arrogance, of that often racist contempt of other peoples and cultures.

Humility means, more and more, avoiding lecturing to others. Abandoning the vulgar dialectical gimmick of comparing our best with the others' worst. Comparing Jesus with Chinghiz Khan, and not Hitler with Buddha. Pretending we Europeans were born democratic, pluralistic, liberal, instead of telling the truth about centuries of horrors (including the one that very recently ended, the 20th), of our difficult and yet incomplete path to tolerance and democracy.

Our history of conflict, contrast, bloody change does not allow us to preach, but only to share our experience on the ways to attain a more humane, I would say a more human, pattern of life in a society.

This is indeed the message that the European Union is trying to transmit in its foreign policy: not to teach, but to share; not to impose, but to assist. And especially, to show that history is not destiny, but is the possible creation of human will and a joint human effort.

Having drawn a general framework of what I feel are the components of the European spirit, or rather of what I would call «the European proposal», I will try to shift to a more philosophical approach. I will refer, in order to do that, to the work of an Italian philosopher, Massimo Cacciari, and especially to two of his books: *L'archipelago* and *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa*.

Cacciari develops his reflection on the meaning of Europe starting from its Greek roots, and from the basic tenets of Greek philosophy. In this reflection the concept of «archipelago» is very fundamental. Europe cannot be compared

either to an island, in its separateness, nor to a continent in its indistinct bulk and mass. Europe is by definition, and from its most ancient origins, a multiplicity that, exactly as in the a case of an archipelago, is both unity and diversity. The European spirits reject the indistinct One and prefers harmony, presupposing distinct notes, to a monotone sound. Allow me here to break away from this philosophical reasoning to switch to history and politics. Whenever Europe has been tempted by the demon of forcible, non-voluntary, military unification, from Napoleon to Hitler, the result has been war and disruption. European integration has originated, in the theory and practice of great statesmen (from Monnet to Adenauer, from De Gasperi to Spaak), from this rejection of a united Europe obtained by force, by military predominance and by cultural and political *hybris*.

Cacciari, always following his Greek paradigms, stresses that multiplicity, for the European spirit, is not anarchic, but «logical», in the sense that it is founded on a *logos* that is seen as essentially relational. The islands of the European archipelago are not separate entities, but they are *kosmoi*, i.e. orderly structures in constant reciprocal dialogue. They are not prone to subordination, and they are deeply inimical to imposed hegemonies.

Again, let me add another footnote to Cacciari. This typically European rejection of both anarchy and monolithic unity has a powerfully significant artistic counterpart in the novel, a form of human creativity that is deeply European in its intrinsic pluralism, in what Bakhtin has called «polyphony». The novel, while constituting, when artistically successful, a definite and consistent creation, is not amenable to a reduction to a single note, a single theme, a single dimension of human experience and sensitivity.

Far from Cacciari (and I would add, far from real Europe) the idea that harmony is an inevitable, innate characteristic of Europe. Quite the contrary, the history of Europe is a history of tensions between the poles of difference and unity. The islands of the archipelago, I would say, are constantly pulled in a centrifugal or a centripetal direction, toward isolation or fusion. European history is the history of this never-ending, never-solved tension. This tension, Cacciari writes, can be addressed in the form of *dialogos*, but also of *polemos*, of conflict.

He writes: «The European archipelago exists in the light of a two-fold danger: to be absorbed in a hierarchically ordered space or to be dissolved in inhospitable, idiotic individualities incapable of looking for each other, in calling each other, in parts that no longer have anything to share with one another» (*L'arcipelago*, Milano, Adelphi, 1997, p. 2).

The end of this tension, much as someone might be tempted to do away with its often intolerable burden, would mean the end of Europe.

Periodically the temptation has been there. Because, Cacciari reminds us, *logos* can mean measure and dialogue, but also the pretense to abolish multiplicity, to enforce a *reduction ad unum*, to attain Utopia, i.e. that island which ignores and cancels the archipelago. Europe, if it wants to be faithful to itself and to be able to contribute to human civilisation at large, must avoid both anarchy and totalitarianism.

Permanent tension, therefore, and also a permanent voyage. Ulysses is the typically European hero, in his progress through routes that did not exist before the voyage.

One is reminded of the verses of a Spanish poet, Antonio Machado: «Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar» (Traveler, there is no path. The path is made by the voyage).

And also of Dante's Ulysses, in the *Divine Comedy*, exhorting his frightened and tired companions: «Fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza» (You were not created to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge).

Europe, says Cacciari, is essentially a dialectic endeavour, rather than a dogmatic one. Dialectic, one should specify, in the Greek sense, as problematic, constant dialogue and even contrast (the Greek tragedy is a marvellous example), and not in the Hegelian one. We will not have, nor are we striving for, a European synthesis solving the tension and the contradiction that are the characteristic trait of Europe.

And he adds something extremely important, when he stresses – asking whether such a thing as a «community of islands» is conceivable – that the capacity to address external difference is rooted in the recognition of internal difference: «Only if each island will be aware of itself not as a simple individuality, as a resolved, accomplished and self-satisfied unity, to be imposed at the center of a hierarchically ordered space. Only if each

island, knowing itself, will discover within itself the complexity and the same variable and unpredictable geometry that forms the archipelago» (*L'arcipelago*, cit., pp. 31-32).

This is indeed the description of the task individual European nations are engaged in, not always in a consistent way, but we feel irreversibly.

I would add that the same parallel between acceptance of external difference and acceptance of internal complexity can be also applied to the individual level. Europeans have fallen as much as anyone else, if not more, into the trap of single identity, usually raised to totalitarian and idolatric levels, the premise of violence and war. But it is also true that another opposite current – a very powerful one and one that finally has been prevailing – has characterised them in a plural way. Today's European, and again one should focus on young people, is typically an individual of multiple identities: global and European, national and local, politically diverse, oriented in one way or the other in religious, or non-religious, terms, defined by gender and even sexual orientation. The full richness of the European archipelago can only flourish if the full richness of each individual is allowed to recognise itself and to bloom in freedom and pluralism.

But is not this a task that faces humans everywhere in the age of globalisation? Europeans have their own history, their own identity, their own spirit, and yet the tasks they are facing are not qualitatively different from those that other human communities are facing in our age. Because it is the entire globe that must learn to live as an archipelago, abandoning the totalitarian urge to impose one single mode of society, one single way of thinking, one single way of living your spirituality and your political system. But at the same time we cannot live with permanent conflict, within a bloody anarchy made of reciprocal ignorance and fear.

Europe can offer to others its experience in trying to attain both all the unity necessary while preserving all the difference possible. Without arrogance, which it has exceedingly practiced in the past, but also with a quiet pride.