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# THE IDEA OF EUROPE BETWEEN UTOPIA AND ROOTEDNESS. A EUROPEAN CANON FOR THE EDUCATION OF A NEW GENERATION OF CITIZENS

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## *abstract*

*Historically, Europe has always dealt with its problems through the use of terminology and the Greco-Roman classical model. Such was the case of not only the Italian humanists that created a new world through the renaissance of antiquity but also the philosophers of the enlightenment whose ideas sprouted from the basic model of the classics, consequently resulting in the fall of the ancien régime. This tradition of humanism and universalism was once again used in the 20th century by the founding fathers of a New Europe post the Second World War. Today this very idea of Europe has been put into question. As a result, there is the necessity to rethink a New European Canon that could serve as a starting point for a New Humanism of which education could constitute as an essential vehicle.*

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## *keywords*

*Europe, Humanism, Civilization, Education*

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*“The idea of the European project is the most modern idea,  
the most revolutionary, and socially the most just  
of these last decades”  
(M. S. Tavares)*

Anniversaries often become vain rhetorical celebrations, but the centennial of World War I, which coincides with the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Italy from Nazism and fascism, gives us an opportunity to reflect, not only on the individual events, but on the entire thirty year period from 1914 to 1945, the period of the so-called “European Civil War”, paying particular attention to the two postwar periods.

The first, following peace treaties motivated more by a spirit of vengeance than by a love for justice and peace, paved the way for the Europe of totalitarianisms.

The millions of dead, “the useless carnage”, as Pope Benedict XV has defined it, served no purpose. The pope, in his *Letter to the Leaders of the Belligerent Peoples* of August 1, 1917, had written: “Will Europe, so glorious and thriving, run, almost as if overwhelmed by universal folly, into the abyss, toward actual suicide?”.

The following two decades seemed to move almost inevitably toward the realization of this tragic prophecy. They in fact saw the triumph of Stalinism, of fascism, and finally of Nazism, which quickly led back to war: a true descent into hell with Auschwitz at its center. Paradoxically, precisely from the depths of such horror, emerged something which at first seemed almost like a utopia<sup>1</sup>: the idea of a new Europe, one which could aspire to banishing the logic of power already clearly identified in ancient times by Thucydides in his famous Melian

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking of Jean Monnet, De Gasperi, Schuman, Adenauer, and before this the small group of Italian intellectuals who in August 1941, forced into confinement by fascist tribunals, drafted the “Ventotene Manifesto”. Naturally I am referring to Ernesto Rossi, Eugenio Colorni and above all Altiero Spinelli. The document, which anticipated and inspired the European Union, was written during the most tragic moment of the conflict, when Nazi power was flooding across Europe. This gives it something of a prophetic quality. It is worth remembering the title of the text which reads: *For a Free and United Europe*.

dialogue<sup>2</sup> and by Plato through the words of the Sophist political thinker Callicles in *Gorgias*.<sup>3</sup> In the modern era it was Machiavelli, speaking of the political power exercised by princes, who revealed “*with what tears, with what blood it flows*” (Foscolo 1987, v. 158). Certainly Christianity, which introduced a radically different discourse, had overturned such reasoning. Nevertheless, History continued to manifest itself largely as that *great slaughter-bench* as Hegel put it. From the original myth of the Trojan War, an infinite series of other wars culminated in the unheard-of violence of the two world wars.

None of this prevented the formation over the centuries of a civilization founded on a series of largely shared values, with a vast shared cultural foundation that, beginning with Greco-Roman civilization, through to the Magna Charta, humanism, the Scientific Revolution and much else, has given meaning and significance to the word Europe. In many ways Christianity has served as the glue, joining the universalism inherited from the Greek world to the entirely original sentiment of equality among men splendidly expressed in this famous passage of the Letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.<sup>4</sup> Texts of this nature, we may call them classics, leaving aside their religious value, never fully exhaust their meaning, which continues to develop over time according to the principle of inclusion of ever-higher values.

Europe seems to have moved along two, parallel but at the same time completely antithetical, tracks — pursuing, on the one hand, a logic of pure power based on force and, on the other, building through the community of philosophers and of *people of good will*, an ever-richer humanism.<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically, the two tracks appeared to overlap with Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, perhaps Europe’s most advanced and cultivated nation, and this is cause for never-ending astonishment. We know what the results of this terrible short-circuit were. But the most determined pursuit of the goal of subjugation and violence produced, almost according to the law of opposites, the reemergence in full light of those positive values, at times concealed in the context of European civilization, that in the end allowed, for the first time since the *Pax Romana*, a long period of effective collaboration among peoples who had fought each other ferociously for centuries.

This made possible a process of integration, at first solely economic, whose objective was the birth of a United Europe: no longer a simple utopia, but in certain respects an exemplary one. This, at a time when, the Soviet colossus having collapsed, the Cold War balance of terror has not been replaced by the desired global peace but by a clash between a superpower that is becoming progressively weaker and a form of terrorism as terrible as it is obscure and apparently elusive because of its capacity to be reborn in ever-different forms.

At this point Europe, not without its own ambiguous form of weakness, can play a central role if it can position itself in defense of the values of democracy, freedom, and solidarity

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2 “Right is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides 1954/1972); see *The Melian Dialogue*, V, pp. 84-116. Here I will add that taking inspiration also from this dialogue, as well as from Machiavelli’s thought read in the same vein, are the U.S. *neocons* (such as Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, etc.), inspirers of the politics of George W. Bush, and whose spiritual father is considered to be the philosopher Leo Strauss.

3 In Plato’s *Gorgias*, 483e, Callicles, opposing Socrates, maintains “it’s a just thing for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share than the worse man and the less capable man [...] that the superior rule the inferior and have a greater share than they”.

4 Galatians 3:28 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible - New Revised Standard Version).

5 Here it is useful to remember Simone Weil, who reflected on the themes of force and war for so long and so profoundly, starting with *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* (Weil 1960).

that have reemerged and become the object of reflection for so much contemporary political, philosophical and legal thought.<sup>6</sup> The Europe that stands for rights, for social solidarity, for tolerance without hegemonic claims, but does not position itself as subordinate, this is the Europe that can become the reference point for the realization of a *new humanism*.

**1. Working toward Europe in the classroom**

Husserl writes that there is no Europe without philosophy, which arose in ancient Greece to embody “the very *eidos* of culture,” a movement tending towards freedom, which represents continuous renewal of the self and of one’s own world, and universal education towards humanity or to “cultivate humanity”, as Nussbaum would say (Husserl 1999, p. xiv). Culture is undoubtedly fundamental to the process of European integration, which cannot consist solely of economics, technology, and politics. But we cannot forget that schools represent an essential transmission link between cultural elites and society as a whole.<sup>7</sup> After all, the “Ventotene Manifesto” (1941) already underlined the importance of schools in the formation of a non-nationalist sensibility.<sup>8</sup> One must therefore inevitably pose the question: how useful for the rebirth of Europe is the slow and difficult work of the school, inside the school? I have consciously used the term *rebirth* because we should not forget that well before the development of nation-States – with all that ensued on the continent, in particular with regard to war and peace – Europe was a reality that was strongly felt and lived, at least inside what one could call the “Republic of Letters”. The great historian Giorgio Falco calls medieval Europe “the Holy Roman Republic” (Falco 1968). Christian and Roman Europe was considered to be the shared mother, at least by the community of scholars. We can comfortably trace back the existence of the *European* to those remote centuries (Reale 2003, p. 25). Let us cite one of many possible examples: Dante, who in his *De Monarchia* imagines, completely naturally, a German sovereign as a political force harmoniously parallel to the spiritual authority of the Roman pontiff. The position of the one and of the other was to be universally recognized in a world which in fact already at that time coincided with the borders of Europe, even in the minds of the most prominent intellectuals. Returning to Dante, he was deeply even if contentiously, Florentine. He was so consciously Italian that he established the foundation of the language. But his political thought may, upon reflection, make him the first or at least the most renowned theorist of the *res publica europea*.

The first but not the only one. And this *res publica* had a language of its own, Latin, which, given the prestige of Italian culture, at times approached the Italian language thanks to intellectuals like Petrarch who was born in Italy, grew up in France, and traveled widely, and who upon reflection may also be considered *cives europeus*. It is clear that here we are referring

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6 Starting precisely with the terrible destruction of the two world wars, in particular during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, profound philosophical reflection has intensified with the aim of reestablishing those values of freedom, tolerance, democracy, and pluralism that the tragic totalitarianisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had trampled. A tradition of Western thought has therefore been recovered, which can be traced in particular to English liberalism and to the French Enlightenment with Kant as its highest exponent. The profound sense of such reflection is contained in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, with its principle of the equal dignity of all human beings, which brought a normative revolution to which the Genevan philosopher Jeanne Hersch has dedicated her best pages. Other thinkers to reference include Habermas, Rawls, McIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, who references Aristotle, and Amartya Sen, economist, philosopher, and theoretician of democratic globalization with social justice. I wish in particular to underline how much American culture looks to Europe, and how difficult it is to imagine what this same culture would look like without the contribution of the thousands of European intellectuals, in large measure of Jewish origin, who were compelled to flee by the terrible persecutions of the Nazis and fascists.

7 “Teaching [...] as defined by the Third Republic [...] has built the spiritual unity of the nation.” See E. R. Curtius, cit. in Renan 1993 p. xxvii.

8 Exactly the opposite of what was done during the first decades of the last century, when precisely the schools, inside the individual nations, helped arouse disastrous nationalist hatreds.

to an intellectual elite, in many cases clergymen, who made up a community united by language, by shared readings of mostly Greek and Latin texts, by the Christian faith.<sup>9</sup> A cultural elite that traveled, studied, taught in universities often very distant from their places of birth, exchanging ideas and creating new knowledge.

Platitudes abound regarding past centuries. The historicism which prevailed until the middle of the last century has made us forget what the eye readily sees, even before the mind realizes it, if one simply visits the “Aula Magna” (the main auditorium) of the University of Padua’s “Palazzo del Bo”. Gathered there are images of the many scholars who have studied or taught at this university. What is impressive is the number of countries they came from, some of them considered remote even today (I have in mind certain parts of Eastern Europe).

Moreover, precisely as Europeans, we cannot forget that the extraordinary Greek civilization of which we are justly proud, and in particular Greek philosophy, which represents perhaps its highest achievement, originated in the Greek colonies of Asia Minor, that is, not in the *purity* of the motherland but rather in the lively multicultural *diversity* of cities like Ephesus, where the Greeks could expand their knowledge thanks to the fertilization provided by Eastern learning. The extraordinary fruit of Greek philosophy reached maturity in Athens but first sprouted on the coasts of Asia Minor, where the mingling of Greek genius with the knowledge, science, and technology of the most ancient Eastern civilizations made possible a successful graft.

If in our daily work in the classroom we highlighted, whenever the opportunity arose, these periods of *blending* which consistently mark the progress of humanity. If we stressed how much Europe became impoverished between the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire and the age of the Crusades, when, isolated from any contact with the Eastern world, it saw its culture fall into decline and its customs and quality of life become hardened and less civilized.

If we underlined not only the great conquests of the scientific revolution and of modern States, but the heinousness which stains us, from the practice of slavery to the colonial wars and finally the horrors of totalitarianism. If, I repeat, we always tried to be intellectually honest with the youth who are entrusted to us, not ideologically oriented, then we could more naturally help shape them – direct them toward an appropriate recognition of our numerous and complex roots and toward the respect of those higher values that we inherited first from Greco-Roman civilization, and then from Christianity. Without however committing the sin of arrogance, proud and at the same time humble and respectful of other people’s identities. This we have been taught by centuries of history filled with much light but also with darkness, culminating in what could have been Europe’s suicide, the last world war. Instead, the resulting loss of political leadership could herald a new era of moral leadership, if we can do things right. Because this could become the Europe of the third millennium: a model for the respect of universally valid human rights. What happened to Greece, after it was defeated by Rome, can happen to us – as Greece, retaining only the most elevated aspects of its cultural heritage and renouncing for itself and for other peoples the most violent and barbaric, became a teacher to Rome.

We have spoken of the enormous importance of culture, in all of its expressions, in the construction of European identity. The same process, it is useful to remember, took place in Italy, whose identity as a nation was forged over the centuries by way of an extraordinary cultural heritage accumulated well before its political realization as a unitary State.

We must recognize that Europe also has a strong shared identity that has been weaved together by its various peoples over the centuries. This European identity is evident not

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<sup>9</sup> Especially at a time when there is no shortage of voices pushing for a clash of civilizations, let us not forget the large number of texts, particularly those relating to science, that are of Arabic origin.

only in relation to Eastern civilizations, but also with respect to the United States and Latin America, which are also in some way its descendants. If it is clear that Goethe more than Shakespeare or Cervantes (but one could cite hundreds of other names) belongs to Europe *in toto*, it becomes evident that schools, the educational system, play a vital role in the formation and consolidation among youth of the awareness of belonging to a common European homeland.

Moreover, to reiterate, a similar process took place, on a smaller scale, in the 19th century on the politically fragmented Italian peninsula, when, once political unity had been achieved (1861), it came to the matter of “making Italians”. The promotion of literacy and the study of an Italian canon transmitted through the schools and including Dante and Saint Francis (not by chance Italy’s patron saint), Petrarch and Machiavelli, Alfieri, Foscolo, and many others,<sup>10</sup> served to build a profound sense of common belonging, much deeper than that based on the military and political supremacy that fascism speciously tried to construct.

Here I would like to underline how much the ferocious nationalisms of the 18th and 19th centuries have deliberately obscured, that is to say, how there is no great Italian spirit, nor German, French, Spanish or other, which has not in some way considered itself intensely and *in primis* European. And in fact we refer to more modest personalities as “provincial”, indicating a sense of belonging and horizons which are localistic and limited. It is important not to confuse love of one’s country and mother tongue, however deep they may be, with provincialism. Our own Goldoni wrote extraordinary plays in Venetian, yet he lived for many years and died in France, bequeathing to all of Europe his desire for peace and harmony. Mazzini, as we know, was the founder not only of the “Young Italy” movement but also of the “Young Europe” international association, thus prophetically anticipating the final goal of his intense political work. This fact has always struck me, and I strongly stress it in the classroom when the opportunity arises, given that current textbooks usually do not.

Every good history book tells of how, in the 19th century, with the formation of the Kingdom of Italy and shortly thereafter the German Reich, the centuries-old process of the formation of nation-States – which began more or less in the late Middle Ages in the context of the disintegration of the very idea of empire – came to an end. In reality, looking carefully at the biographies of the various patriots who fought for the freedom and independence of their homelands, be it the Italian Mazzini, the Pole Theodor Körner or some other, what stands out is the sense of *brotherhood* in the name of *freedom* that unites them. The patriotic sentiment of the Romantics at the beginning of the 19th century in reality has little to do with the exasperated 20th century nationalisms, with their terrifying succession of wars and of death, which almost managed to erase any sense of shared solidarity. Thus when discussing the various wars of national independence, beginning with the battle for Greek independence, we must stress that intellectuals from all of Europe were wholeheartedly engaged in these efforts, even to the point of death, united by faith in the values of freedom and tolerance.

2. **A European cultural canon** As we have said, beginning with the second postwar period, Europe began to reverse course, moving in the direction of rediscovering shared roots, and countries like France, Germany, and Italy planted the first seed of a new Europe. What is called for is a kind of European Francesco De Sanctis, capable of constructing a history of literature which is at the same time a history of European civilization, identifying the poets,

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<sup>10</sup> A work like Francesco De Sanctis’ *History of Italian Literature*, which closely linked Italian literature and Italian civilization, probably contributed more to the birth of national sentiment in this country than is usually recognized. It would be worth reflecting on this in an age of *decentralization*.

artists, thinkers, scientists, and politicians who knew how to build a shared house, capable of welcoming those voices that, even in their diversity, were able to produce a common way of feeling.

Therefore a shared canon not only of literature, but also of history, philosophy, science, art – disseminated through the schools of all the countries of Europe – would be of fundamental importance to create a widespread and shared European identity.

Nevertheless it must be said that, much more than adults, the new generations already resemble each other in certain respects. They dress in the same way, listen to the same music, communicate with one language, a “simplified” English that in a way represents a modern *koinè*. But here we are moving into the field of a kind of globalization which reaches well beyond Europe and turns out to be quite superficial. We are instead interested in identifying something specifically European, a particular *Weltanschauung* having its origins in Europe’s history, which expresses itself in the values of freedom, tolerance, respect for the other, in a form of citizenship that, born in the Greco-Roman world, was later enriched with a sense of brotherhood by Christianity. This sense of brotherhood is also expressed in that synthesis of the French revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, that not so wisely is often identified with a secular, anti-Christian spirit, precisely because we underestimate that last term, *fraternité*, which is a direct descendant of the Christian *agape*.

*For since the dawn of history, men have been  
continually mixed, unified, broken up, and mixed again;  
and this cannot be undone, even if it were desirable.*  
(Karl Popper 2003, p. 607)

### 3. Europe’s foundation

The place of Christianity is a central question and point of conflict in debates on the origins of Europe.

The subject of the foundations or origins of Europe was one of the most hotly debated when it came to identifying and naming such foundations in the preamble of the European Constitution. There were animated discussions about this issue, especially about the role to be given to the Christian religion. Speaking of culture or civilization seemed to many to be different than speaking of faith.

The problem involves the indisputable fact, readily apparent to all, of Christianity’s presence in the very fabric of European history. Without knowing and recognizing the significance of the Christian faith one cannot gain access to the idea of Europe. To give a small example, consider the history of art, which found its greatest source of inspiration in the stories and characters of the New Testament (and before that of the Hebrew Bible). It would be absurd to ignore all this.

The fact remains that at least fourteen million Muslims live in today’s Europe – six million in France alone, three million in Germany, five million in the United Kingdom, a considerable number also now in Italy. To be fully part of the European nation they must recognize the weight of the Christian tradition, but they cannot be forced to convert to our faith. Europe itself experienced the drama of its own wars of religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Secularism was borne of the effort to transcend religious hatred, allowing each person to live one’s own faith *in interiore animo*, differentiating politics and culture from religion. It is worth reflecting on the secular stance claimed *ante litteram* already by Dante or by Marsilius of Padua, which was perfectly reconcilable with the deepest of faiths but which today is often confused with an ahistorical, unsophisticated anticlericalism. At the time of Italy’s most violent clash between church and State, the age of Italian unification, Alessandro Manzoni and Antonio Rosmini offered shining examples of what it meant to be believers and at the

same time secular, not clerical. It should be clear that clerical and anticlerical are opposite terms that are in my view both negative in value, while *secular and believer* are perfectly even if not necessarily *reconcilable*, and it is just this reconcilability that constitutes one of the fundamental achievements of European civilization, just like the idea of democracy. This does not mean that once acquired, these riches will remain ours forever.

The highest praise for democracy may perhaps be found in Pericles' speech in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but it took more than 2,000 years for democracy itself to become a reality in Europe and, on the European model, in few other parts of the world. As to the right to freely profess one's faith, we cannot forget what happened in the former Yugoslavia, where after decades of peaceful coexistence between Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims, an unexpected and horrific bloodbath returned in the 1990s. It must be explained to young people that no achievement is "forever". On the contrary, the more precious something is, the more it must be defended with absolute devotion. The *civilitas* which Europe undoubtedly carries forward is a fragile treasure, a precious legacy to be constantly protected.

As to the controversial issue with which we started: how to reconcile the recognition due to Christianity with respect for those European citizens who profess different faiths? The issue cannot be addressed with drastic measures such as denying the right of citizenship to non-Christians, as a new generation of "bad teachers" – who stupidly call themselves *sanctimonious atheists* and, taking their cue from the above-mentioned U.S. neocons, imagine a "clash of civilizations" – goes around boorishly preaching; rather we must return to the fundamental concepts of European civilization and democracy, of mutual respect and tolerance which cannot leave out mutual recognition. Levinas' lesson, his invitation to allow a human ethics of the other to grow, founded on the respect that each individual owes to the other, is to be welcomed and spread (see especially Levinas 1987 and 2003). The same is true of Jonas' invitation: *include in your current choice, as an object of your will, the future integrity of man* (Jonas 2004). Not to speak of the teaching of Hannah Arendt, who has long reflected on the subject of the responsibility of the political system and of each individual towards the other, suggesting that the very essence of freedom lies in our being "plural" individuals (Arendt 2003). Here again the importance of schools returns to the fore. Mutual recognition happens through the school. This does not mean a confused *cultural hodgepodge*, but enrichment of individual lives and thus of all of society thanks to stimuli gracefully received each time they are offered with friendship.

True faith is never disrespectful towards the other. After all, Christ never discriminated against anyone, excepting the presumptuous Pharisees and the greedy merchants in the temple. The wide outstretched arms often used to represent him in the iconographic tradition "signify" openness to anyone – oppressed, humiliated, suffering – who turns to Him, without useless distinctions regarding identity.

Beyond faith, universal ethical values undoubtedly exist – values shared by all the great religions, toward whose definition Western philosophy has much contributed.

The classroom represents the privileged vehicle for the transmission of these values. This does not mean engaging in a trivial form of syncretism, but transmitting through the institution of education, a profound sense of universally recognized rights. These rights are particularly emphasized in Western thought, which thanks to Greek civilization has learned the lessons of universalism since its origins, leaving interior space to each individual to cultivate their faith without confusing different realms. To give one example: the wearing of the veil on the part of Muslim women represents a choice that it would be cruel and stupid to contest, but to impose on them a cruel submission to fathers or husbands gravely limits their rights to freedom, and this the Europe which is in the process of being born cannot accept.



To conclude I will cite the words spoken by Claudio Magris upon receiving the Asturias Award in 2004:

Only a truly united Europe can turn frontiers between its nations and cultures into bridges that join them rather than barriers that separate them.

European unity should not induce fear. In fact, we are already living a situation that is European rather than national. This *de facto* European unity will have to move more and more towards institutional unity, though the way forward is plagued by difficulties and setbacks. Love of Europe does not presuppose some Eurocentric, myopic pride; the center of the world nowadays is anywhere, and will brook no iniquitous domination of one particular area.

European humanism is also a battle for the equality of any of man's provinces, as Canetti called it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Claudio Magris, Prince of Asturias Award for Literature 2004 speech. Princess of Asturias Foundation. <http://www.fpa.es/en/princess-of-asturias-awards/laureates/2004-claudio-magris.html?texto=discurso&especifica=0> (accessed February 28, 2015).