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IS EUROPE A “FALSE TRUTH”? A DISTINGUISHING ATTEMPT TO UNMASK PREJUDICES CONCERNING EUROPE AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

abstract

European institutions are continuously requested to contribute in solving those problems that States have nowadays to face, but – at the same time – their alleged authority and influence are unceasingly brought into question. Examining 33 “false truths” concerning Europe, Smaghi suggests a new way the current crisis should be dealt with: what matters most is the awareness that European States manage to achieve in regard to their past errors, their present potentialities and their future possibilities, without deeming Europe itself as a scapegoat. Rhetoric, action and credibility: Smaghi aims at making readers deeply ponder over some prejudices regarding Europe and at restoring European citizens’ faith in Europe.

keywords

European Institutions, Awareness, Prejudices, Citizens’ Role, Responsibility

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Everyone can choose how to face an urgent, difficult or dangerous situation: on the one hand, through a scrutinized analysis of the problem, trying to find out a way to solve it or – on the other hand – putting the blame on somebody else, passively hoping in better days. This is exactly the situation that European *citizens* have nowadays to face. According to the second possibility, the exploitation of public opinion’s difficulty in understanding *who precisely* holds the power and in identifying *who precisely* has to be blamed for a negative happening, enables European citizens to shift the entire responsibility to European institutions. This way of acting – Smaghi argues – is inherently reprehensible: it is not a responsible behaviour and it ends in a *stalemate*. In fact, European institutions are continuously requested to contribute in solving those problems that States have to face, but – at the same time – their alleged authority and influence are unceasingly brought into question. Hence, this position becomes ambiguous: it criticizes and blames Europe’s conduct, but it also recognizes its validity and legitimacy, asking European institutions for help. It seems that the advocates of this position sustain Europe, but not *this* Europe.

According to a responsible behaviour, instead, Smaghi aims to unmask those false truths regarding Europe and its role. For this reason, he examines the problems that Europe and European States have nowadays to face, pinpointing an *inner* cause of these problems, without ineffectively blaming only European institutions. This accurate analysis enables Smaghi to set in a new frame – devoid of any prejudice and bias – the crucial problems that today grip Europe and its States: origin and development of Europe, Euro, ECB (European Central Bank), budgetary constraints, countries’ relationships and, lastly, Italy’s role in Europe. Every theme is investigated from the point of view of those prejudices and false truths that gradually and increasingly have shaped and moulded public opinion. For this reason, the book’s structure is very interesting and stimulating, in so far as it enables the reader to clearly understand all those prejudices that rule over the public debate. As Smaghi underlines, this book aims to make the readers ponder and such purpose seems to be thoroughly reached, thanks to a careful and detailed examination of 33 prejudices and to a flowing and clear reasoning. Nevertheless, this abundance of so many noteworthy topics and themes could threaten the argument itself: sometimes, in fact, the style becomes a little schematic and excessively telegraphic. Hence, reading could be, occasionally, a little laborious, but this mental exertion is fully rewarded: the author manages to analyse many widespread prejudices about Europe in a concise way, leaving the reader with so much food for thought.

Examining these different topics, Smaghi suggests a new way to face the current crisis: what

matters most is the *awareness* that European States manage to achieve in regard to their past errors, their present potentialities and their future possibilities, without considering Europe itself as a scapegoat. Smaghi, in fact, describes Europe as an evolving structure and, more importantly, as an *unicum*: in modern history, it was the first time that independent States peacefully began an economic and political integration, a cooperation built up with a democratic and peaceful method and with the approval of all member States.

Smaghi's aim is to make the reader deeply reflect upon some prejudices regarding Europe and to restore European citizens' *faith* in Europe. This fact, precisely, is the first "false truth" scanned, that is, the prejudice according to which Europe's birth was decided only by elites and not by citizens. Discussing this issue, Smaghi reminds that C.A. Ciampi, in 1998, said that Euro would not be a paradise, but a purgatory: it means that Euro would not be the start of a golden era. Nevertheless, the illusion according to which Euro should have solved all the problems got around intensely widespread. This prejudice endures still today, like, for example, the idea that Europe suffers for a broad democratic deficit and for bureaucracy's slowness or, furthermore, the bias according to which Euro has eroded States' sovereignty (and so sovereignty should be still imaginable and possible only without Euro). Moreover, Euro is often and definitely wrongly conceived as something that has unjustly fostered Germany, especially, and exporters of Nord Europe: it sounds like to say – Smaghi maintains – that motorways are responsible for accidents, because they enable drivers to go faster. Disregarding the fact that counterfactual analyses seem to be worthless, Smaghi argues that Europe's destiny largely relies on governments' behaviour, efforts and initiative. If this fact is not recognized, governments will blame the doctor (that is, Europe) for the treatment prescribed, without an appropriate prevention backwards. The possibility to get over the current crisis depends on Europe's ability to go ahead and write its own history, without thinking about going back and trying to dismantle Europe itself. Smaghi's reasoning is grounded precisely in this assumption, which - on closer examination - turns out to be the steady background of every "false truth" debated in the book. In order to exemplify this assumption and other author's theses, it is useful to briefly examine three sizable prejudices among the 33 studied by the author.

According to the second bias, Europe has not democratic legitimacy: European Parliament, in fact, is not enough representative and its authority is not appropriate, whereas European Commission has the appropriate authority, yet it lacks an adequate legitimacy. Consequently, the supporters of this stance end up holding true that only States have the right to take decisions concerning fundamental issues, because only States rely on institutions that can be really evaluated as fully democratic. In reply to this thesis, Smaghi argues that Europe's democratic structure is *hybrid* and *evolving*: this means that the national level and the European one are always overlapping and, moreover, every possible democratic deficit is supposed to be gradually solved. Eventually, the author points out that democratic legitimacy of European Union is vastly superior than the one of other international organizations, like ONU – where the countries with veto power are not all democracies – or International Monetary Fund – where the decisions are taken by majority. The members of the European Union, on the contrary, are all democracies and, for example, the European Parliament is voted by universal suffrage.

Still concerning the issue of democracy related to European institutions, according to the 14th prejudice, the irreversible nature of Euro is judged undemocratic: the treaties ratified, in fact, allow States only to exit from European Union, not from Euro. Very cleverly Smaghi's examination shows that a hypothetical exit from Euro would inherently imply the *secrecy* of this decision that so would be taken in an undemocratic way. It means that if the decision of a country about exiting from Euro was given forth, then the country at issue would face

a destabilization of its financial and banking system. This would occur because the money savers of this country, once come to know the forthcoming exit from Euro, would try to defend their own savings by closing their account in the country at issue and opening a new one in a foreign bank. Hence, a democratic exit from Euro is not possible, but if it was opted for, it would entail high economic costs and besides – Smaghi points out – it is not certain that such a decision would solve country’s troubles and would return its monetary sovereignty.

Moreover, there are false truths that concern more technical and specifically Italian issues, for example the 24th bias. According to this one, particularly, budgetary constraints do not take countries’ prosperity into account and this anomaly is well explained by Maastricht Treaty’s criteria. These standards penalise Italy, because – according to them – public debt is measured in terms of Gross Demand Product and not in terms of families’ prosperity. This guideline puts Italy at a great disadvantage, because families’ prosperity is here higher than in other countries. But, again, this is not the problem at issue: through a deeper examination, in fact, Smaghi shows that this kind of reasoning does not make sense in regard to Italy’s fiscal situation and to the role that family plays in it.

In the book’s last pages, Smaghi examines the program sketched by the four Presidents’ Report (2012): it identifies those scopes in which economic, fiscal and banking union should be strengthened in order to reinforce political and economic integration. In this frame, Italy plays a quite important role, in so far as it is Europe’s keystone: a stronger Italy would make Europe stronger and capable of meeting citizens’ requirements. This is the commitment Europe and Italy should aim at, but it depends only on citizens’, institutions’ and States’ choices, loyalty and efforts. *Rhetoric, action and credibility*: citizens should become aware that problems have an inner origin, that Europe is often conceived as a scapegoat and that it is time to carry out a precise program of reforms, which can give Italy back its competitiveness, strengthening its role in Europe, strengthening Europe itself and strengthening Italian citizens’ faith in Europe and its institutions.

The gradual development of this new awareness, the birth of a new wave of well defined proposals and reforms, the rise of a renovated faith in Europe and its institutions, the brave revealing of “33 false truths” and, finally, a steady confidence in Europe and its citizens are explained as compelling issues that encourage the reader to take part and be involved in this process of unmasking those prejudices nowadays prevailing.