

Europe and its Many Identities

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In the arduous but exciting process of European construction, it is clear that the defining models of 'cultural identity' that we will be able to elaborate in our common European fatherland will be extremely influential for the rest of the world, with an echo effect that is nowadays difficult to assess in full, but whose consequences would be altogether impossible to deny. In this framework, it is crucial that we do not emphasize a definition of cultural identity that is isolationist, but rather one that is on the contrary based upon the complementarity, upon the exchanges between cultures. According to this model, the idea of cultural identity is not based upon exclusion, but rather on a principle of reciprocal inclusion. The example of the Mediterranean area is perfectly appropriate in this case: Mediterranean cannot exclusively imply Europe, but Africa and Asia, too; it implies Christianity (including Orthodox Christianity), Judaism and Islam. It does not constitute a border between global North and global South, but rather an intricate network of communication, with a series of ample and extremely lively spaces of transition, such as the *Romanized* Northern Africa, the *Islamized* Spain and Sicily; or a city that is simultaneously the Byzantium of the greek settlers, the Constantinople of the Christian emperors and the Turkish Istanbul.

It implies an 'European' horizon that is more ancient and vast than those that are often recalled (the Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, the Europe during the Enlightenment, today's Union): that is, the Roman Empire, which stretched from Scotland to the Red Sea and from Gibraltar to the Black Sea. In this context, the role of culture can be particularly significant as the process of European integration cannot exclusively rely on economics and technology. I would like to convey this using the words of the President of the Italian Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi: "Globalization must drive us to value and to promote all cultures in their diversity and originality. The rediscovery of our roots, which are to a certain degree shared, will allow us to fully comprehend and appreciate the value of our diversities".

By its own nature, the European cultural identity is manifold, in the art forms as in literature, in religion as in the institutions and laws. It must be based on diversity and difference, as well as on the relation between different peoples, in Europe as much as outside of Europe. It is precisely at this point that qualified intellectuals are called to an important and significant task, if they will be willing to facilitate the comprehension and to reveal the history of these diversities and exchanges, avoiding to keep for themselves the moment of research and consideration. Academic culture must communicate with popular culture on the great themes of civil society, especially in the urgency of choices and political definitions that implicate all citizens, who could benefit from a higher degree of information and awareness. The definition of cultural identity calls for a multidisciplinary and concerted effort, something that inevitably retains a political dimension, which is most evident at the present moment in time, when this theme is applied to Europe during such a formative and founding moment. In Europe, the various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups have combined with each other with millenary dynamics. The single European cultural identities were formed by means of processes of osmosis and exchange; each of them cannot be defined by distinguishing it from the others, but rather via an analysis of

the elements that make it up, many of which are present in other cultures. In other words, one can argue that the cultural identity is *decomposable* because it results from a process of exchange during which each culture “receives” and “gives”.

It is thus important to recall the past occurrences to comprehend that one’s own culture embraces significant elements originating from other cultures. If underscored with the most effective and well-timed means, this simple and indisputable fact carries with it a cultural and political message that our world utterly needs: a message of opening and tolerance. I would like to propose an example: the role of classical, greek-roman culture in the definition of an European identity.

On this front, we nowadays witness in Europe an extraordinary paradox: on the one hand we ever more often seem to recall the “eternal topicality” of the classical roots of European civilization as a common factor of identity; on the other, we have seen a progressive and inexorable withdrawal of “classical” culture in the educational systems and in the general culture in all those countries that should, according to the statements of their politicians, draw on those perpetual and static values. The more we progressively overlook Roman and Greek antiquity, the more our cultural landscape is imbued with the consolidated idea that “classical” civilizations are the last and only source of Western civilization and depositories of its highest and most definite values (as, for example, democracy). This idea, powerfully effective because taken for granted, stands firm and even gets consolidated right when our detachment from the “classical” world becomes more and more marked, in the collective forms of our culture as in most of the ordinary educational paths.

We are thus witnessing a great cultural mutation, proper to our times, which implies on the one hand the *iconification* of the “classical” and, on the other, its marginalization. But this abstract idea of the “classical” is intertwined with a conception (deriving from the Hegelian tradition) of a West that retains well-marked and closed borders, characterized by a powerful dynamism and contrasting with an Orient conceived as perpetually static. This strictly eurocentric vision also coincides with the conception of Western civilization as superior to any other, and thus somehow legitimized to operate the annexationist or hegemonic policies of the colonialism and any practices of cultural and economic subjection.

The opposition greeks/barbarians is by these means translated into the West/others opposition, once more made topical and projected onto Asia or Africa. This *reductio ad unum* of the complexities of ancient civilizations is destined to produce devastating effects as it tends to trivialize and deprive “classical” culture while at the same time extolling its superiority; it embalms “classical” culture as an unchanging icon while it seems destined to become the subject-matter of an ever-diminishing number of specialists and it progressively disappears from the cultural horizon of all citizens.

But, fortunately, there is a very attractive alternative to that image of the “classical” as something that is perpetually reflecting itself (and ourselves), as something “belonging to the West” and exclusively to the West. In a very short essay (*Les Trois Humanismes*, 1956), Claude Lévi-Strauss has suggested that the rediscovery of “classical” antiquity in the Renaissance can be seen as “a first example of ethnology” as at the times “it was well acknowledged that no civilization can consider itself unless it embraces other societies that provide terms of comparison”: the renewed incidence of the antique then introduced “the technique of alienation” as an intellectual exercise, triggering a cultural revolution of enormous significance whose reverberations are still felt at the present day and in fact have yet to fully unfold. According to Lévi-Strauss, the establishment of ethnology was an extension of the first humanism: the study of ancient civilizations (a “elsewhere” more in time than in space) was followed, by natural evolution, by the study of extra-european civilizations (a “elsewhere” more in space than in time). The first of the three *humanisms* of

Lévi-Strauss then dealt with the study of (or alienation triggered by) greek-roman antiquity, the second with the great oriental civilizations, from India to China and Japan; the third dealt with those cultures that were once named “primitive”, those cultures “lacking history” of the *Naturvölker*.

In this dazzling synthesis, Lévi-Strauss proposes to reconsider the relationship with Ancient civilizations as a form of latent anthropology. His interpretative model revolves around the Renaissance, but here the rediscovery of the “classical” (greek-roman) is not associated with a stable system of Western values that contrasts with those of the “others”; on the contrary, it is placed in the context of the rediscovery of the “other” cultures, in a *crescendo* originating right from the “classical” and necessarily expanding in order to include all civilizations. In this vision, identity and otherness can and actually must coexist. It is thus worth studying the greek-roman “classical” by shuttling between identity and otherness precisely because we deem it to be “our own” *and* because we deem it to be “different” from us; because it is intrinsic to Western culture and indispensable in order to appreciate it *and* because it opens the door to study and comprehend the “other” cultures; because it is a reservoir of values in which we can still acknowledge ourselves *and* because it retains something irremediably extraneous.

The greek-roman “classical” age could then be seen as a gigantic experiment of economic-cultural globalization, culminating in the median centuries of the roman empire, of which we are fortunately well aware of the formative period as well as of the mechanisms and stages bringing about its final collapse. The cultural history of the “classical” age can be (keeping an eye on the present) the privileged place of analysis in the comparison between cultures, both because it is suitable for the exploration of the reciprocal debts between ancient cultures (for example between Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece; or again the Etrurians, the Romans, the Celts, the Britons), and because those ancient cultural exchanges closely matter to us, as European cultures originate from them (and not from an immaculate, exclusively greek-roman “classicism”); they practically make of us what we are today.

In this working hypothesis, the “classical” can and must become a matter of enquiry and study, not anymore as a static and privileged jargon of the élites, but rather as a proficient access key to the multiplicity of cultures in the contemporary world and as a tool to understand a large process of mutual interpenetration. The “classical”, rather than being an immutable model, would then once more become what it had been at times in the past, that is a stimulation to build up a close comparison not just between the Ancients and the Moderns, but also between “our” cultures and those of the “others”; it would become the experimentation and verification terrain of the idea that cultural identity is a process of exchange. The invocation and the revival of the “classic”, indeed, right as the search for a common European identity, was and is nothing else than an incessant looking for our ancestors, which by definition are distant from us and by definition belong to us; they are those who have created us and who in turn we create and re-create each time we evoke them in the present and for the present. The more we will be able to look at our history (since its “classical” origins) as something that is exceedingly surprising and extraneous, which must be re-conquered on a daily basis and as a powerful stimulus to comprehend today’s “different” through the “different” of the past, rather than a dead heritage belonging to us with no particular merit on our side, the more the future, common European identity that it is our task to build will be rich and lively.