

THE SEARCH FOR EUROPE

Contrasting Approaches



BBVA



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What does it mean to feel European? Does a European culture exist? This chapter will analyse the history, challenges and potential of the feeling behind this political entity defined by multilingualism, which, like a patient, is going through real depression, losing its image as a great power and finding itself mired in a deep financial, political and existential crisis. Having succumbed to the dogmas of identity to a criminal extent, the concept of a European “us” is emerging. Given this, Europe now faces a historical challenge: Will it be able to deal with the crisis of universal belief and build bridges between religions and cultures?

HOMO EUROPAEUS: DOES A EUROPEAN CULTURE EXIST?*

Is Europe KO? On the contrary:

“Without Europe, chaos would reign”. Why?

As a European citizen of French nationality, Bulgarian by birth and American by adoption, I am not insensitive to harsh critiques, but among them I hear a desire to grow a European identity and culture. Despite facing a financial crisis, the Greeks, Portuguese, Italians and even the French do not question their belonging to a European culture; they “feel” European. What does this sentiment—so obvious, apparently, that the Treaty

EUROPEAN CULTURE COULD BE THE MAIN ROAD THAT LEADS EUROPEAN NATIONS

of Rome makes no mention of it—mean? It has only recently made an appearance on the political stage via initiatives backing European heritage, for example, but these lack a prospective vision. I believe European culture could be the main road that leads European nations to a federal Europe. However, this begs the question: What is European culture?

Which identity?

In contrast to the cult of identity,¹ European culture never ceases to unveil the paradox that identity does exist, both mine and ours, but it is infinitely constructible and de-constructible. To the question “Who am

* This text is largely taken from a talk given at the international symposium “Europe or Chaos”, at the Théâtre du Rond-point des Champs Elysées, on January 28, 2013.

1 In the name of which the modern conscience, trying to clear itself, continues to wage, even today, wars that destroy freedom.

I?” the best European response is not certitude but a love of the question mark. After having succumbed to identity-focused dogmas, to the point of criminality, a European “we” is now emerging. Although Europe resorted to barbaric behavior in the past—something to remember and examine always—, the fact that it has analyzed its behavior thoroughly perhaps allows it to offer the world an understanding and practice of identity as a questioning inquietude.

It is possible to rethink European heritage as an antidote to tensions of identity, both ours and others. Without enumerating all the sources of this questioning identity,² let us remember that on-going interrogation can turn to corrosive doubt and self-hatred: a self-destruction that Europe is far from being spared. We often reduce this heritage of identity to a permissive tolerance of others. But tolerance is only the zero degree of questioning; when not reduced to simply welcoming others, it invites them to question themselves and to carry the culture of questioning and dialogue into encounters that problematize all participants. This reciprocating questioning produces an endless lucidity that provides the sole condition for “living together”. Identity thus understood can move us towards a plural identity and the multilingualism of the new European citizen.

Diversity and its Languages

“Diversity is my motto”, said Jean de La Fontaine, in his “Pâté d’anguille³”. Europe is a political entity that speaks as many languages, if not more, as it has countries. This multilingualism is the basis of cultural diversity, and it must be saved and respected along with national character; moreover, it

2 I hear this attitude in the words of the Jewish God: *Eyeh asher eyeh* (Ex 3, 14), taken up by Jesus (Jean 8, 23) as an identity without definition, which sends the “I” to an eternal return to its very being. I understand it in a different way, in the silent dialogue of the thinking I with itself, according to Plato, which is always “two in one” and whose thoughts don’t provide an answer but rather break down answers into questions. In Aristotle’s *philia politikè*, he announces a social space and a political project by calling for individual memory and personal biography. In the sense of Saint Augustin, there is only one homeland, which is the voyage itself: In via in patria. Montaigne, in his *Essais*, devoted to the polyphonic identity of the “I”, writes “We are all lumps, and of so various and inform a contexture that every piece plays, every moment, its own game”. In the *Cogito* by Descartes, we hear “I think therefore I am”. But what is it to think? I hear it again in Goethe’s Faust: “Ich bin der Geist der stetz verneint” (I am the spirit who always denies). And in the endless analysis of Freud: “There where it [id] was, I must become”.

must be open to exchange, mixing and cross-pollination. This is a novelty for Europeans that merits reflection.

After the horror of the Shoah, the bourgeois of the 19th century as well as the rebels of the 20th century began to confront a new era. Now, Europe's linguistic diversity is creating kaleidoscopic individuals capable of challenging the bilingualism of "global" English. Is this possible? Everything would prove the contrary. Yet, this new species is emerging little by little: a polyphonic subject and polyglot citizen of a plurinational Europe. Will the future European be a singular subject, with an intrinsically plural—trilingual, quadrilingual, multilingual—psyche? Or will they be reduced to Globish?

More than ever, Europe's plurilinguistic space calls upon the French to become polyglot, to explore the diversity of the world and to bring their singularity to the understanding of Europe and the world. What I say for the French holds true for the other twenty-eight languages of the European polyphony. It is by making incursions into other languages that a new passion for each language will arise (Bulgarian, Swedish, Danish, Portuguese, etc.) This passion will not look like a shooting star, nostalgic folklore or vestiges of academia, but rather it will function as the index of a resurgent diversity.

Emerging from National Depression⁴

Whether lasting or not, the national character can experience real depression, just as individuals do. Europe is losing its image as a world power, and the financial, political and existential crises are palpable. But this has also occurred in many European nations, including France, whose history is one of the most prominent.

When a psychoanalyst treats a depressed patient, he begins by shoring up her self-confidence. In this way, a relationship is established between the two protagonists in the cure, and spoken words become fertile once again, enabling a critical analysis of the suffering. Similarly, a depressed nation requires an optimal self-image before taking on,

3 Cf. "Diversité c'est ma devise" (Diversity is my motto) In *Pulsions du temps*, edited by J. Kristeva, 601. Fayard, 2013.

4 Cf. "Existe-t-il une culture européenne?" ("Does a European Culture Exist?") and "Le message culturel français" ("The French Cultural Message"), in *Pulsions du temps*, edited by J. Kristeva, 601 and 635. Fayard, 2013.

for example, industrial expansion or a more open reception of immigrants. “Nations, like men, die of imperceptible impoliteness”, wrote Giraudoux. Poorly understood universalism and colonial guilt have led politicians and ideologues to behave with imperceptible impoliteness, often disguised as cosmopolitanism. They act with arrogant spite towards the nation. They aggravate national depression and then infuse it with a maniacal exaltation, both nationalistic and xenophobic.

**NATIONAL CULTURAL DIVERSITY
IS THE ONLY ANTIDOTE TO THE EVIL
OF BANALITY**

European nations are waiting for Europe to emerge, and Europe needs proud and valued national cultures that offer the world the cultural diversity that we have requested Unesco to protect. National cultural diversity is the only antidote to the evil of banality, or this new version of the banality of evil. A federal Europe, thus comprised, could play an important role in the search for global balance.

Two Conceptions of Freedom

The fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, clearly demarcated the difference between European culture and North-American culture. It is a question of two conceptions of freedom played out by democracies. Different but complementary, these two versions are equally present in international institutions and principles, both in Europe and North America.

By identifying liberty with “self-beginning”, Kant opens the way to an apologia of enterprising subjectivity, subordinated to the freedom of Reason (pure or practical) and a Cause (divine or moral). In this order of thought, favoured by Protestantism, freedom appears as the liberty to adapt oneself to the logic of cause and effect or, to quote Hannah Arendt, as an adaptation to or “calculation of the consequences” of the logic of production, science or the economy. To be free is to have the opportunity to benefit to the best of one's ability from cause and effect in order to adapt to markets and their profits.

But another model of freedom exists, also of European stock. It appears in the Ancient Greek world, developed under the Pre-Socratics and through Socratic dialogue. Not subordinated to a cause, this fundamental

freedom is deployed in the speaking being who presents and gives himself to others, as well as to himself, and in this sense is liberated. This freedom of the Being of the Word, through the encounter between “One” and “Other”, inscribes itself as an infinite question, before freedom gets roped down into a cause and effect relationship. Poetry, desire and revolt are its privileged experiences, revealing the incommensurable (though shareable) singularity of each man and woman.

One can see the risks of this second model founded on the questioning attitude: ignoring economic reality, isolating corporatist demands, limiting tolerance, fearing to question the demands and identity politics of new political and social actors, not standing up to global competition and reverting to archaic behavior and laziness. But one can also see the advantages of this model, used by European cultures, which don't culminate in a schema but rather in a taste for human life in its shareable singularity.

In this context, Europe is far from being homogenous and united. First of all, it's imperative that “Old Europe”, and France in particular, takes the economic and existential difficulties of “New Europe”⁵ seriously. But it is also necessary to recognize cultural differences and, most particularly, religious differences that are tearing apart European countries from the inside and separating them. It is urgent to learn to respect differences (for example: Orthodox and Muslim Europe, the persistent malaise in the Balkans, and the distress in Greece over the financial crisis.)

The Need to Believe, the Desire to Know

Among the multiple causes of the current crisis is one that politicians overlook: it is the denial of what I call the pre-religious, pre-political “need to believe” inherent to speaking subjects, such as ourselves, which expresses itself as an “ideality illness” specific to the adolescent (whether native or of immigrant origin.)

Contrary to the curious, playful, pleasure-seeking child who wants to know where he comes from, the adolescent is less a researcher than a believer; he needs to believe in ideals to move beyond his parents, separate from them and surpass himself. (I've named the adolescent a

⁵ According to the controversial catchphrase used by American Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, during the diplomatic confrontations on the war in Iraq.

troubadour, romantic, revolutionary, extremist, fundamentalist, third-world defender). But disappointment leans this malady of ideality towards destruction and self-destruction, by way of exaltation: drug abuse, anorexia, vandalism and attraction on the one hand, and to fundamentalist dogmas on the other. Idealism and nihilism, in the form of empty drunkenness and martyrdom rewarded by absolute paradise, walk hand in hand in this illness affecting adolescents, which can explode under certain conditions in the most susceptible among them. We see its current manifestation in the media in the cohabitation of Mafia traffic and the jihadist exaltation raging at our doors, in Africa and Syria.

If a “malady of ideality” is shaking up our youth and, with it, the world, can Europe possibly offer a remedy? What ideas can it volunteer? Any religious treatment of this malaise, anguish and revolt proves ineffective in the face of the paradisiacal aspiration of this paradoxical, nihilistic belief held by the de-socialized, disintegrated teen in the context of unforgiving globalized migration. This rejected, indignant fanatic can also threaten us from the inside. This is the image we have of the Jasmine Revolution, brought about by youth avid for freedom and the recognition of its singular dignity, but that another, fanatic need to believe is snuffing out.

Europe finds itself confronted by an historic challenge. Is it able to confront this crisis of belief which the religious lid can no longer hold down? The terrible chaos of the tandem nihilism-fanaticism, linked to the destruction of the capacity to think and associate, takes root in different parts of the world and touches the very foundation of the bond between humans. It's the idea of the human, forged at the Greek-Jewish-Christian crossroads, with its graft of Islam, in this unsteady universality, both singular and shareable, which seems threatened. The anguish paralyzing Europe in these decisive times expresses doubt before these stakes. Are we capable of mobilizing all our means—judicial, economic, educational, therapeutic—to fight with a fine-tuned ear and the necessary training and generosity the malady of ideality that disenfranchised adolescents (and others), even in Europe, express so dramatically?

At the crossroads of Christianity (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), Judaism and Islam, Europe is called to establish pathways between the three monotheisms—beginning with meetings and reciprocating interpretations, but also with elucidations and transvaluations inspired by the Human Sciences. Moreover, a bastion of secularism for two centuries, Europe is the place par excellence to elucidate a need to believe. Enlightenment, in its rush to combat obscurantism, underestimated its power.

A Culture of Women's Rights

From the time of the Enlightenment to the suffragettes, without forgetting the likes of Marie Curie, Rosa Luxemburg, Simone de Beauvoir and Simone Weil, the emancipation of women through creativity and the struggle for political, economic and social rights offers a federating arena for national, religious and political diversity among European citizens. This distinctive trait of European culture is also an inspiration for culture and emancipation. Recently, the Simone de Beauvoir Prize for the Liberty of Women was given to the young Pakistani Malala Yousafzai, gravely wounded by the Taliban for having supported the right to education for young girls on her blog.

Countering the two monsters—the political lockdown by the economy and the threat of ecological destruction—, the European cultural space can offer an audacious response. And perhaps it is the sole response that takes the complexity of the human condition seriously, including the lessons of its history and the risks of its freedom.

Am I too optimistic? To highlight the character, history, difficulties and potentialities of European culture, let us imagine some concrete initiatives: for example, organizing a European Forum in Paris on the theme “European Culture Exists”, with the participation of eminent intellectuals, artists and writers from 28 countries, representing a linguistic, cultural and religious kaleidoscope. The idea would be to reflect on history and current events in this plural and problematic ensemble, which is the EU, and to raise questions around its originality, vulnerability and advantages. This Forum could lead to the creation of an Academy or a College of European Cultures, perhaps even a Federation of European Cultures, which would serve as a trampoline for or the precursor of a political Federation. Multilingualism would be a major actor in this dream.

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