

## Is another Europe possible?

The Ventotene spirit and the teaching of European history.

Fabrice Olivier Dubosc

If we are to embrace the present predicament, we must face the fact that much of the ongoing psycho-political storm has to do with the issue of difference, whether relating to gender, 'race', religion, culture, sexual preference, the differential value of lives, or economic inequality. We shall be forced to choose: shall we recognize difference as part of a tension adding to the common good or through the paranoid overtones of immunity and exclusion?

Between 1941 and 1944 Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Ursula Hirschmann conceived a free, democratic, federal entity furthering peace and the common good. They did so on the Island of Ventotene where they had been banned into forced exile by the Italian fascist government. They imagined the progressive struggle as first and foremost related to a new transnational European narrative. They saw as a priority the widening of borders. In the wake of the War and through its horrors Europeans were being forced to acknowledge a responsibility towards millions of displaced and dead civilians. Refugees, then, were really the cutting edge. Living witnesses challenging us to rethink our identities.

Recently three European leaders (Merkel, Hollande and Renzi) convened in Ventotene to pay tribute to such heritage.

However their present strategic agenda for the future of Europe is anything but visionary. Its focus is threefold: to contain the present financial crisis and the Great Immigrant Exodus and to create a joint military force.

The challenge to imagine Europe remains largely unanswered. On Mediterranean shores the count of corpses increases daily. Meanwhile it is easier to «forget Europe» if Europe is not able to produce any valuable narrative for itself. In terms of "belonging" it is much easier to opt for that impoverished version of love, "cultural supremacy", that projective shortcut that seeks to further the local or national "complex" turning difference into a threat. Others had hoped Europe could give strength to their difference.

In the long term, no economic measure, no military joint effort, no tightening of borders will suffice to nourish a common cultural identity, both for the new generations and for new Europeans landing on these shores.

In this spirit, I would like to submit a very simple idea: **The European Parliament should unanimously recommend that the subject 'European History' be taught at each level in each Secondary school of the European Union.** The possible drawback appears evident: institutionalizing prematurely something that could only stem from a wide confrontation. The unending work of memory cannot be transmitted by protocol. The issue is far deeper than a legislative measure. But such law or recommendation would open the issue of curricula. And this would open a political debate and possibly a generative conflict between different stances, as well as confronting our lack of adequate representations. Hopefully this process would eventually help us assess the possibility (or impossibility) of a vital European narrative.

Many disciplines should contribute to the curricula: history of cultures, cultural anthropology, sociology, oral history, philosophy of history, psychoanalysis and so forth. It would be easy to observe the intertwining of events in a wider perspective. Of course, most curricula already include some pre-national history. But we shall have to choose how to present the complex dialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages, the history of Crusades and of Corsair trades, the re-discovery of Greek philosophy brought by Muslim scholars, the Renaissance. Should we not reconsider within a wider horizon the birth of regional states and their unending

wars, the expulsion of Muslims and Jews, the wars of religion and the persecution of religious minorities? Should we not accept that trade slavery was one of the main economic foundations of modernity, entwined with the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions? Shall we have the courage to consider both the tension to the universal in the Enlightenment and the barbaric abuses of colonialism? And so forth and so on up to the present ecological, geopolitical and ethical crisis. Would not the millennial heritage of the wars that were fought on this old continent lead to an un-rhetorical search for difference? Then the need to belong could be creatively nourished by pluralistic awareness rather than reduced to inauthentic, reactive, defensive stances. Of course there will be other positions. Many would like to represent the history of Europe within the rhetoric of exclusion. The very opposite of the Ventotene spirit. But at least the debate might tell us what the 'difference' of Europe might or might not be.

Perhaps it is not too late. Or perhaps another Europe is not possible and this plea is but an ethnocentric remain. But it would certainly be a great symbolic act if all interested parties. would gather to discuss this idea in Lampedusa or some other Mediterranean Island where the challenge to both our feeling and our thinking lands or drowns daily.