

Istituto Regionale di Ricerca della Lombardia

IDEAS OF EUROPE

Milan, 10 December 2007

INTERNALISING AN IDEA OF EUROPE

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To think about the idea of Europe *in Italy* is especially appropriate – a special pleasure and privilege. Italy made the distinct character of Europe. Ancient Rome - republic and empire, and transmitter of the Greek inheritance. The Church of Rome. The Italian Renaissance. Those are the three roots of Europe's distinct character.

When we speak about the making of the character of Europe we are bound to say 'for better and for worse'. Italy is not responsible for the dark side of Europe's inheritance. Italy is not responsible for all that successive generations of Europeans have made of Europe's wonderfully rich, but ambiguous, cultural inheritance. But, when we try to form an idea of Europe, we, as Europeans, must include, in that idea, Europe's darkness as well as its light.

And now, when the world that Europe made is being extrapolated to the whole world – in a process called *globalisation* – we must not be surprised if a globalising world contains both European light and European darkness. Looking at the turbulent and troubling state of the world, in its present dynamic self-transforming condition, we are bound to feel a double sense of responsibility - legitimate pride and a necessary sadness.

Already implicit in what I have said are three inconvenient ideas.

1. Thinking about the problem of the idea of Europe is not an innocent academic activity. It has important practical real-world implications.
2. The problem of the idea of Europe is no longer merely a European problem, no longer merely a problem of so-called European integration. It is part of the problem of the subjectivity of human social co-existence in general.

3. The problem of the idea of Europe is a contingent problem. There are as many possible ideas of Europe as there are contexts in which such an idea might be relevant. In other words, the title of these seminars is appropriate. Any particular ‘idea of Europe’ is one among countless possible ‘ideas of Europe’.

There is another very inconvenient, but inescapable, idea. When people who are *not* innocent, or *not* academic, talk about the idea of Europe – or the idea of the United States of America or the idea of China - we have to ask: why? What is their motive? What are they trying to achieve by talking about such a thing? *Cui bono?*

If they refer to the problem in a *political* context, then it is safe to assume that they want to cause a *particular* idea to establish itself in the minds of their listeners, for some specific *political purpose* of their own.

To take one example at random – the preamble to the late (and unlamented) draft Constitution for Europe. That text was a splendidly lyrical presentation of a particular idea of Europe, a sort of fairy-tale idea of Europe. Reading it, it was impossible to keep out of one’s mind certain other ideas of Europe, certain other aspects of Europe’s cultural inheritance.

It was a mental experience equivalent to seeing the words *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* on the outside of French public buildings. Seeing those words, our perverse minds are inclined to recall that our societies, in their real-world existence, can also fly the flags of Servitude, Inequality, and Selfishness – perfectly familiar everyday aspects of the fabulously powerful democratic-capitalist societies that we Europeans have created for ourselves, social forms that are now being exported to the whole world.

There is a fine passage in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* when Brutus, who will murder Caesar, encourages the crowd with the following words -

‘Then walk we forth, even to the market-place,
And, waving our red [blood-stained] weapons o’er our heads,
Let’s all cry “Peace, freedom and liberty!”’

It is remarkable that Shakespeare was already aware not only of the power of sloganising – but also of the special power of slogans in triptych form.

‘Cry “God for Harry, England and St. George!”’ (*Henry V*).

‘Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ (US Declaration of Independence).

Compare the preamble to the EU draft Constitution – ‘civilisation, progress and prosperity’; ‘culture, learning and social progress’; ‘peace, justice and solidarity’; ‘the continuity of the Community *acquis*’ (!).

Ideas about one's self, and the social formations to which one belongs, may be *spontaneous* or they may be *learned* or they may be *imposed*. They may arise from within our own interior subjectivity, our self-constituting. For example, one's idea of oneself as a family-member. Or they may be imported into our minds from outside – as we *learn to recognise* the social formations to which we belong. And, thirdly, they may be imposed on us by those who control public consciousness in some way

And there is, in effect, a fourth possibility – which it is difficult not to see as *sinister*. A subjective identity may be *imposed* on us by causing us to *recognise* a social formation to which we belong, as if it were a part of our spontaneous subjectivity.

In one of its most sinister forms, this *induced subjectivity* manifests itself in the distinction between *patriotism* and *nationalism*.

We may be induced to love our country, not least in order that we may be willing to die for our country – and in order that we may be willing to kill and destroy in the name of our country.

Patriotism hijacked to serve national policy is as old, presumably, as inter-tribal conflict and competition.

We may remember *Pericles* (or was it merely Thucydides?) – '[we Athenians] yield to none...for independence of spirit, many-sidedness of attainment, and complete self-reliance in limbs and brain.'

We may remember *Livy* – 'Remember thou, O Roman, to rule the nations with thy sway, these shall be thine arts - to crown Peace with Law, to spare the humbled, and to tame in war the proud.'

We may recall David Garrick – 'Britannia triumphant, her ships sweep the sea; Her standard is Justice, her watchword "be free".'

We recall Daniel Webster – 'may [the United States] itself become a vast and splendid monument, not of oppression and terror, but of wisdom, of peace, and of liberty, upon which the world may gaze with admiration for ever.'

So the mighty preamble to the European draft constitution had distinguished predecessors. However, at least to an English mind, a *comical* aspect was that the authors of such touching social poetry (to borrow a fine formula from Giambattista Vico) were politicians, diplomats and civil servants (!).

This was as if the English King Henry VIII had delivered a homily on the sanctity of marriage, or Machiavelli had written an essay in praise of holy simplicity (*sancta simplicitas*). The current US written constitution contains 7 articles and 27 amendments. The draft European Constitution was somewhat larger.

We may also be induced to love our country in order that we will *legitimate* its institutions. The governing class knows that it is never more powerful than when the people identify themselves with the power of the governing class.

No sane person could ever *love government*, but to get the people to suppose that they are the *authors* of the *authority* of the government (echoing the fateful wordplay of Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*) is a wonderfully useful fiction, both for the governors and the governed.

Governments want to be loved. The masters of European integration would love to be loved. The masters of European integration would be happy if the people of Europe could be led to suppose that they see the best of themselves reflected in the mirror of the European Union.

The people of Europe have three thousand years' experience of the stories that each succeeding oligarchy tells. The people of Europe are inclined to sophisticated and unsettling perspicacity in such matters.

There is a good saying of Edmund Burke – conservative optimist – ‘To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.’ (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*).

If Europe is our country, now as it always has been, then the relevant question is – what idea of Europe should we want? - what idea of Europe do we need? And, as I have said, that is a contingent question. It is a function of our situation, our situation as we understand it.

So, given our current situation, how can we, the people of Europe – who are not politicians or diplomats or civil servants – how can we best express a new idea of our subjective attachment, our affective relationship – our love, even - for the place and the people and the history and the civilisation that we think of as Europe? ?

I will hazard a summary of our present situation, as we, the people of Europe - who are not politicians or diplomats or civil servants - understand it.

I would begin with another quotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* –

‘The sun of Rome is set. Our day is gone.’ (Titinius, friend of Brutus, speaking).

The idea that Europe's ‘day is gone’ is present now in many people's minds, consciously, subconsciously, or unconsciously.

Secondly, there is a sense of historical shame – especially for the horrors of Europe's 20th century – but also for aspects of Europe's past – imperialism,

religious persecution, wars of religion, slavery, endless wars of all kinds, the shameless oppression of the mass of the people for long centuries.

We cannot forget something said by a former Prime Minister of Singapore – ‘Europe is in no position to preach to anyone about anything.’

Thirdly, there is a sense of decline, loss, corruption of the best – an *Untergang des Abendlandes* (O. Spengler). *Corruptio optimi pessima* (an excellent Roman saying) – a sense of growing alienation from the form that our civilisation is now taking – especially under corrupting influences from outside – a sense that, for a while in the past, manifested itself as anti-Americanism, and is now more often associated with what is called ‘immigration’.

Fourthly, there is a sense of physical and economic insecurity, as the world’s centre of gravity moves away – especially to the East.

Fifthly, there is a sense that the future may not be better than the past – a negation of the idea which, above all others, made European civilisation – the idea of *progress*, the continual improvement of society and human life, in accordance with powerfully attractive *ideals*, including the ideal of *justice*.

Sixthly, there is a strange, paradoxical sense that, as life gets better, it gets worse. Above all, there is the sense that a heavy price has been paid for the amazing development of modern society – that price includes a loss of subjectivity, individuality, self-confidence, self-consciousness, personal dignity, personal responsibility, civic responsibility - in the face of overwhelmingly powerful social systems.

I won’t continue with this negative litany – no doubt it could be extended - because my immediate purpose is to suggest that *the necessary idea of Europe* must contain the dialectical negation of all these things.

The strange fact is that European history contains also another feature – a perennial and peculiar feature.

From Hesiod in the 8th century BCE, through Augustine (died 430 CE), to Savonarola in the 15th century – and very many others in the intervening years and since the 15th century - Europe has again and again sensed its own decline and fall. Even in the 19th century, when Europe seemed to be ruling its many different worlds, material and mental, there was no shortage of prophets of doom among historians and culture-critics.

In European subjectivity, the idea of ‘our day is gone’ has been a permanent counterpoint accompanying the theme of European triumphalism.

And so today, in a new period of anguish within European subjectivity, an idea of Europe that is not invigorating, redeeming, and energising is certainly not the necessary idea of Europe.

And that is the awful problem faced by the European Union. The EU can so easily seem to be associated – in the minds of the people of Europe – with several, if not all, of the negative elements that I have litanised above.

Thomas Hobbes referred to the Church of Rome as ‘The Ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof.’ (*Leviathan*, ch. 47). The EU can so easily seem like a ghostly apparition (a *revenant*) from Europe’s self-imperialising past, rather than a beacon on the hill of Europe’s future.

To expect the masters of European integration to produce *Europe’s redeeming idea of itself* is not a sensible expectation. The people of Europe must *remind themselves* of their true reality – a reality that cannot – and should not – be expressed in Orwellian fantasy words such as ‘freedom’, ‘progress’, ‘peace’, ‘democracy’, or ‘civilisation’.

The words *libertas* (freedom) and *auctoritas* (authority; law and order; the rule of law) were central to Roman political rhetoric. The Roman historian Tacitus (*IV Historiae*, lxxiii) has a good sentence on the use of such words by politicians. ‘Moreover nobody ever sought power for himself and the enslavement of others without making use of *libertas* and fair-sounding words of that kind (*speciosa nomina*).’

It is a wonder that thoughtful politicians – then and now – could continue to use the word ‘freedom’ as if it referred to some *absolute good*, expecting to be taken seriously.

The historically verifiable characteristics of the people of Europe contain the elements of Europe’s *necessary idea* of itself.

1. *Perseverance*. For three thousand years, Europe has somehow survived, and often prospered, through unceasing troubles and impossible challenges, gradually accumulating a form of existence which, for all its faults, is a great human achievement. The European species seems to have an extraordinary capacity for Darwinian adaptation and survival.
2. *Creativity*. Europeans have been manically creative in every field from the most abstract metaphysics through the most admirable fine arts to the most ingenious engineering. They have created almost every surviving form of social system and have, again and again, taken the activity of the human mind to new limits.

And their work has been exported world-wide. The dynamic creativity of the United States has, at least until very recently, been the

work of a Europe-in-exile, a Europe-across-the-water, a transpontine Europe. And the same is true of other newly dynamic societies elsewhere.

American national myth-making, focused on the idea that America-is-not-Europe, began no later than 1620. From no later than 1776, the new Republic continued the process of national myth-making with admirable purpose and lucidity.

The rebellious Americans had two advantages in their story-telling. They could, and did, claim to be the true and better heirs of a thousand-year British constitutional tradition, a tradition itself seasoned with myth, fantasy, and poetry. And they had a double creation-myth, itself as much fiction as fact, to the effect that the original settlers in 1620 were escaping from the clutches of oppression, and that they themselves were throwing off the yoke of tyranny.

3. *Responsibility*. Through the universalism of Greek philosophy, the political and cultural imperialism of ancient Rome, the spiritual universalism of the Roman Church, the intellectual universalism of the Renaissance (the Renaissance of the 15th century, completing those of the 9th and 12th centuries), and the political-economic globalism of modern imperialism (from 1500), Europeans have always thought of themselves as acting in relation to the whole of humanity.

Europeans have taken responsibility – and must now accept responsibility – for the way the human world is. Europeans cannot – and should not – suddenly decide that, having made the world as it is, they no longer have a universal responsibility for making what it might be.

The effort to internalise a redeeming idea of Europe, a necessary idea of Europe, will not be designed to produce what has been described above as an *externally induced spontaneous patriotic subjectivity*. It will be a fifth kind of patriotism – an *internally re-awakened spontaneous patriotic subjectivity*.

If Europe needs a motto, it could be taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* (bk. xii) –

perge: decet.

Persevere. It suits you.

(The rest of the Virgilian line is - *forsan miseros meliora sequentur* – ‘perhaps better things will come for those who now grieve’)