

THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF EUROPE AND EU

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Abstract: *The name 'Europe' implies an intercultural identity that is felt so much that, within its borders, the notion of 'foreigner' has undergone a profound change over the centuries and now retains a merely legal and administrative sense. The use of the same term 'foreigner' to indicate a citizen of a different European nation has almost disappeared. Plural participation is essential in creating wider affiliations: the European identity comes from more restricted and hard-fought identities, but is becoming the identity of an extended group within which tensions are going to ease and bonds of solidarity are going to be accepted as normal among different European nations. The use of a plurality of languages as instruments of communication, in the inevitable pluralism of a European community, is the acceptable solution, provided that the expressive possibilities of minority languages are not stifled, with the term 'minority' applying to all the national languages spoken only in Europe. Individuals become bilingual so as to respond to specific functional demands existing in their situation of life, to meet certain communication needs that are imposed on them by the social reality. All the nations that make up Europe have a European sense of geographical belonging. If a political-administrative bond, that of the EU, is also added, then Europe itself is configured as a voluntary, shared sense of belonging that strengthens the bonds of the European identity itself.*

Keywords: *EU; intercultural identity; plural participation; bonds of solidarity; European identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

The European population is made up of a set of peoples characterized by different languages and cultures. Although in the current age populations have become homogenized thanks to the speed of certain aspects of information, specific cultural and political diversities remain that are often more divisive than unifying. In spite of this, the peoples that decided to form a union feel the need to share their humanity with other peoples, and even in their historical, linguistic and – in general terms – cultural specificity, they acknowledge the bond ensuing from their feeling of being Europeans by right of soil (*jus soli*) and culture. For single nations, the cost of their specific identity has been a substantial number of wars, peace treaties, cultural exchanges and particular attractions, leading overall to a positive assessment of the construction of a common Europe made up of peoples with histories encountering other histories, and of languages that have always found a vehicular language able to overcome borders without losing individual identities. So we have come to a position where we see a united Europe, sharing the desire to partake in the present and

future of a common history. The inhabitants of Europe are generically Europeans: those who are Italian, German, Romanian etc. are also European, and are so simultaneously with their primary identity, which more precisely determines this. The wider identity is less meaningful than the specific one, which is more personal and all-embracing. One could say that the states converging in the EU are twice as European as the states remaining outside it. In fact, every citizen of the European Community has a double affiliation: one relating to the community, meaning a social affiliation, and one geographical.¹

As a sociologist, it is indispensable for me to start from the notions of community and society concerning every individual (Tönnies, 1966). The community is the core to which a person is bound

¹ "Europa" and "Asia" are the names of the children of Oceanus and Thetis, and they appear in the 7th century b.C. in Hesiod's *Theogony*. So they belong to mythological characters and have no geographical reference. Nonetheless, "Asia" corresponds to a Semitic word meaning "Orient". Originally the name "Europe" was probably used by the Greeks to indicate the territory to the north of the Mediterranean Sea.

for good or ill from birth, and the individual goes toward society “as if into a foreign land”. Blood ties, neighbouring relationships and friendships are the foundations of a community. Society is juxtaposed to community as the expression of a contract drawn up for specific and practical purposes, a contract that the parties may revoke at all times and within which they never lose their individuality and the sense of being in reciprocal competition. Within society, everyone works toward their own advantage. Each person tends to maintain agreements and contracts and is apparently open to others, accomplishing what Tönnies calls “conventional society life”, based on a diffused formal politeness. We all seem to be reciprocally helpful, but in fact we are busy assessing the advantages that are possibly entailed by relations (Mazzara, 2000: 42). These are the grounds upon which both the economy and the higher expressions of societal organization are based, which, as such, are opposed to the concrete and natural reality of the community. The direction is thus toward more complex forms of sociality. This idea is the basis of the ways with which an increasingly wider sense of belonging is accomplished, and consequently the definition of non-belonging and how to relate to it. Between the individual psychological dimension, i.e. perceptions, motivations and emotions, and the structure of social affiliation, there is a constant bidirectional interaction. We perceive the other person by ascribing each to the category to which they belong, therefore not in their pure individuality, but within the general type to which they belong. This allows the person to be seen not merely as an individual, but within the roles (and appearances) that he/she takes on in society. Every individual finds he/she has multiple affiliations at the same time, and the number increases according to the complexity of the society (Weber, 1974).

Society is the repository of a confrontational charge that encourages the multiplication of associative instances and cultural differentiation. The grouping of a community is based on relationships of solidarity, while society presents itself as an antithetical pole: the ties of solidarity are transformed and replaced by relations of a legal and economic – or in any case formal – kind (Tessarolo, 1990).

When studying groups that are homogeneous in themselves, but strongly opposed, we may observe that the differentiation of each group in itself generates assimilation and draws the members of different groups nearer to one another, causing a weakening or dissolution of the restricted

circles, both through the individualization of partners within the circles and through the extension and connection with more distant partners. The widening and the trend to extension leads to fragmentation among the elements of the groups that were previously homogeneous; differentiation increases with society’s progress, and so does assimilation, meaning the process of coming closer to the other lineage (Simmel, 1982: 54). The extension of the group affects the freedom of its members: the more the group is individual, the less so are its members. A greater differentiation of the social field corresponds to a lesser differentiation of the personal field. The width of the group guarantees a wider margin for formations and deformations. The amplitude of the circle, in fact, weakens the individual because identity starts to diminish and it becomes difficult to ask oneself: who and what am I? (Simmel, 1982: 59).² The local identity is not in contrast with wider identities, even if in wider identities the ties of solidarity are less strong and therefore become less binding.

2. LIVING WITH DIVERSITY

Community and society display vitality, although with a varying degree of intensity of the feeling of belonging. As its basis, this reasoning retrieves the ancient bonds that existed among European communities. These communities share an ancient history made of a succession of wars and peace treaties, reciprocal aid and distancing. But at a certain point in recent history, and precisely at the end of the Second World War, in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty was agreed by Roosevelt and Churchill. In 1951 the Treaty of Paris was signed by six founding members, thus creating the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). In 1957 the Treaty of Rome marked the establishment of the European Economic Community and of the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). In 1967 they became part of the European Communities (EC), a long process – involving several treaties – that was finalized in Maastricht in 1992. A common currency was

² A weakening of identity or belonging may lead to the fear of being “gobbled up” or assimilated, losing one’s identity. That is how being European has brought many states of the EU to a sovranist government. According to the intellectual and journalist Bernard-Henry Lévy, one such example is the success of Brexit at the British referendum: it is not a victory of the people, but of populism.

implemented in 2002, while the current name and structure were adopted with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. There are currently 27 members, because other member states joined the first 15.

In a united Europe the importance of supranational languages grows, meaning the languages that – due to their spread – are useful in exchanges with speakers of the different varieties of local languages. Bilingualism is always a phenomenon of an individual nature in the first place, since it is the individual who is bilingual and not the community to which he/she belongs. Individuals become bilingual so as to respond to specific functional demands existing in their situations of life. Belonging to a group means speaking a certain language, and understanding others implies speaking the same linguistic variety or the same official language. Besides facilitating economic exchanges and acquaintance with others, these positions can also avoid linguistic conflicts between neighbours. The changes taking place in contemporary society have brought each subject to take on several roles, therefore the role of speaker is also included in the increasing range of possibilities offered by society to the individual. The obligation to study a language, though, leads to triggering the fear of losing one's identity. Languages change gradually and continuously all over the world. This is no reason to ingenuously fall into the trap of the myth of a single universal language, because individuality and creativity are unsearchable elements even when we refer to languages (Sapir, 1969). In order to understand the problems generated by language differences, the functional roles taken on by language need to be grasped. To gain acceptance of the plurality of languages, a plurality of roles must be designed (Francescato, 1981, Fishman, 1975 and Tassarolo, 1990). The plurality of cultures in the EU is one of many factors making the improvement of communication possibilities within the EU itself more complicated. De Grève (1982) makes a distinction between "civilization" and "culture", interpreting the two as a bi-univocal relation. The word "civilization" expresses permanent and unitary values, while the term "culture" refers to variables that are historically and geographically conditioned. Multilingualism is a form of respect for diversity and traditions. The EU is something that is added to the states, whose characteristics it respects; and its motto "United in diversity" respects this necessity, ascribing equal dignity to the various languages, while promoting the learning of a number of European languages (at

least three) starting in childhood³ (Tassarolo, 2007). The EU declares that it respects cultural and linguistic diversity and is committed to safeguarding Europe's cultural heritage (Constitutional Treaty with three paragraphs). None of the member states would accept the imposition of a language. Instead, some languages have been accepted and have acquired the status of community language, even though they are not official languages in their respective country (Catalan). Multilingualism may be seen, from time to time, as enriching or hindering: cultural enrichment that is protected and highlighted, or an obstacle when English monolingualism is required in a committee. Absolute equality among languages is not functionally possible, while controlled multilingualism is possible.

It makes sense to speak of European identity, even if Europe is not homogeneous, because the nations that form it have common roots. We could think that an imposed identity is replaced by an identity originating from a gradual break-down and re-composition of the small differences: after all, modernity equals differentiation, splitting, breaking down, multiplication of singularities (Cristin, 1997). Such multiplication reflects the image of an identity born from division and fracture, and that consequently – just like a plural identity – follows Leibniz's formula according to which diversity is compensated by identity (*Varietas identitate compensata*). A form of dialectic existence in which singularities coincide, although they remain such, in a globality that in turn constitutes a new wider singularity does not relate only to the cultural sphere, but also to the political one (Cristin, 1997: 21).

The European common root has developed through divisions and fractures relating to both the cultural and the political sphere, both of them inherently plural. This plurality emerges when the word "Europe" is pronounced: with it we refer to a very broad area and to a very heterogeneous ethnic and cultural environment (over twenty peoples and almost as many languages), a set of states whose characteristics differ greatly in both a political-social perspective and in a production-industrial one. Economic, political and cultural multiplicity is Europe's dominant feature. The relation between unity and plurality may be resolved as a comparison or as a dialectic synthesis. The expression "plural identity" may also be

³ The languages should be: the mother-tongue as first language, English as third, and a middle language of choice.

investigated in a phenomenological way, gathering all the spheres we mentioned and thus showing the growing dynamic inherent in the situation, highlighting its link with action; it generated it and in turn has the ability to reproduce or eliminate it. Many historians have discussed the basic feature of European civilization as one of discord, variety and struggle. But struggle, instead of becoming a principle of immobility, may be seen as a “cause of progress” (Guizot, 1973).

Europe is a varied, rich and complex civilization that never fell under the rule of an exclusive principle in which the different elements of the welfare state combined to the point of being established for living together. Cristin (1997) observes that Europe expresses a double character of unity and diversity distinguishing it among the continents. Starting from this tension, modern civilization is the result of countless local civilizations, happily united into a single stream. According to Gadamer, it was Europe’s privilege to have to – and find a way to – live with diversity, more than other countries. This idea was previously Montesquieu’s, who in the 18th century comprehended Europe as a “nation” composed of many nations (1991: 22). We agree with Cristin (1997) on the need to find a logic capable of demonstrating the need for Europe’s identity to continue constituting itself as a plural identity, also entailing a union of the political and philosophical aspect, so as to allow it to take responsibility for respecting the inherent plurality. Philosophy should respond both to the needs of multiplicity and to those of liberalism, like Husserl’s phenomenology, where respect for the plurality of ideas and goals is accompanied by respect for the freedom of individuals and their choices.

Heilmann (1982) observed that the complexity of the European situation does not stem only from the remarkable number of “major” and “minor” languages,⁴ even if we see this area in a unitary perspective that is limited to the West. But complexity may be seen with a social-political view, organizing the languages in Europe into a hierarchy of independence; and with a view of a psychological nature concerning the speakers’ awareness. Europe has a unitary matrix as regards civilization (meaning the permanent and unitary values). Such a matrix is subject to the same debunking assaults that identify civilization and technology, leading to a levelling of cultures (i.e. the variables that are historically and geographically conditioned). Resorting to one or

more languages as an instrument of communication for the inevitable multilingualism of a European unity will be an acceptable and fruitful solution, provided it does not stifle the expressive possibilities of minority languages in a consumerist levelling – where “minority” languages are not only those of the small groups of traditional minorities, but also less prestigious (or less widespread) national languages. If Europe does not continue to corrode the matrixes of its own culture, but recovers them whole, and succeeds in granting all – majorities and minorities of various kinds and weights, in a spirit of tolerance – equal freedom and dignity, then a solution will also be found for the linguistic problem, without shocks and without victims.

3. COSTRUCTING STABLE BONDS

When considering and criticizing the binding power of institutions, it is important to remember that they also afford different possibilities. The discussion on action and social structure leads to a basic concept of sociology: the construction of reality. People who act create social reality through their thoughts and actions. The structure of such reality coming into being is partly or completely separate from the people who created it and live in it. This brings us to agree with Goffman (2007: 25) when he uses the expression “dangerous giants” to refer to individuals, because they have the ability to act and consequently the potential to discontinue and destroy the structures in which they live, even if those who act are often not aware of their power (Ritzer, 2013). Discrimination may sometimes be considered the only possible way to solve problems due to the lack of recognition and representation, and therefore shared justice. In this case, discrimination becomes a powerful social trigger for the creation of ad-hoc social policies aimed at integrating the minorities that, in order not to be discriminated, will submit to the rules of the majority.

Bauman speaks of “imagined communities” and affirms that all communities are imagined and the global community is no exception either. But imagination becomes a powerful and coagulant force if it is supported by institutions such as collective self-government and self-identification, as is the case for modern nations and the sovereign states to which they gave origin.

Adopting a single language is not conducive to developing the values and contents of different cultures, but the preservation of cultural differences is, although this generates high social

⁴ The total number of languages is 27.

costs and controversies in the political sphere. In the light of what Simmel said, a multilingual education contributes to a less rigid position for the speaker. Plural participation is essential in creating wider affiliations. The European identity comes from more restricted and hard-fought identities; more and more, it will be the identity of an extended group within which tensions are going to ease and bonds made more binding among the nations that form Europe (Tessarolo, 2007).

In the current age, the fragmentation of reality into a plurality of opinions is prevalent, and this is precisely why the trend is to behave as guarantors, so that protecting and not justifying becomes the mainstay of human rights. The problem of human rights concerns some rules (Bobbio, 1984). The first has to do with the fact that the majority is always right; the second with the minority that is always due to an act of magnanimity by the majority; finally, the third rule is the alternation in governing the community.⁵

4. ADDENDA AS CONCLUSION

I finish this article on Europe in a grave moment – not just for Europe, but for the whole world – due to the Covid-19 pandemic, spreading in Italy with unexpected intensity. My thought goes to what history teaches us on aid and unity among peoples. When Ireland suffered the terrible famine causing death and migration between 1846 and 1848, some help (three ships loaded with food) came from a Turkish sultan. In these extremely difficult weeks, Italy is asking for face masks and respirators; China, which was affected only shortly before, responded. Italy and the Vatican City had been the first countries to send face masks to China a few weeks earlier.

In the Italian Constitution, Article 2 recognises “the inviolable rights of the person, both as an individual and in the social groups where human personality is expressed. The Republic expects that the fundamental duties of political, economic and social solidarity be fulfilled”. “Solidarity” is a key word lacking in the vision of the EU. In a crucial time as now, however, thanks to a pandemic, it seems to be impossible to only look at the sphere of economic relations, and human rights are being placed at the forefront.

⁵ The phrase “human rights” is used here, although in classic thinking the form should underline the binomial person-society in its double combination: *persona pro societate* and *societas pro persona* (Coccopalmerio, 1989).

The words spoken in Italian by European President Ursula von der Leyen were comforting: “Dear Italians, I would like to tell all of you fighting against the virus that you are not alone. Your example and your effort are valuable for all European citizens. In Europe we are following what you are doing with concern but also with profound respect and admiration. Italy is part of Europe and Europe suffers with Italy. In this moment, in Europe we are all Italian.”

It is my hope that such sharing and distribution of nationality will always exist, also for the positive aspects involved in the life of each Member State.

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