Mira Miladinović Zalaznik – Dean Komel
(Eds. | Hrsg.)

Europe at the Crossroads of Contemporary World
100 Years after the Great War

Europa an den Scheidewegen der gegenwärtigen Welt
100 Jahre nach dem Großen Krieg

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Adriano Fabris

Patterns of Identity for a Multicultural Europe

Abstract: How is it possible to develop in Europe a real community (and to build the true "European Community")? What are the forms of "identity" experienced in the European tradition? In general, there are three meanings of the term "identity": the closed (or "wall") identity, the reflected (or "mirror") identity, and the "open" identity. The paper will discuss these patterns and apply them to the idea of Europe under discussion today. Only by referring to a "open" identity—this is the final statement of the paper—will Europeans be able to resolve the many difficulties they have to face in contemporary age. The so-called "populism," in fact, is more a problem than a solution.

Keywords: Europe, identity, fundamentalism, multiculturalism, universality

What it Means to be European

In this historical period, despite everything, we cannot deny that we are European. Despite everything: that is to say, resisting the temptation, which nowadays is particularly strong, to lay claim to certain particularities and specific identities. Being European has become a given, a fact.

However, to be truly European—and a "good European," to cite an expression by Nietzsche—we must, first of all, have a clear idea of precisely who we are: understanding correctly, on the one hand, our relationship with the other citizens of the Old Continent and the long history that unites us, and, on the other, our relationship with the new citizens, the migrants, with whom we are increasingly interacting. We must rise above the tendency of comparing an "us" to a "them," each closing themselves to the other. Rather, we need to consolidate an "us" that is able to bring us all together.

The problem is how to achieve this. One of the obstacles, up till now, has been the way in which the "us" was conceived and contin-

ues to be defined, as well as the way in which our relationship with the other has been, and continues to be, understood. In other words, the problem is the idea and the construction of our *identity*: first and foremost, in our case, of a *European identity*.

So, what does it mean to be European, beyond the often over-simplified images that are frequently presented to us? To answer this question we must, first of all, look to the past. It is a shared past, a history of which we cannot always be proud—since in most cases it has been marked by war, persecutions, and violence—but from which we have been, and still to this day are, able to learn. This has been demonstrated by the fact that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the utopia of a European community, of a Europe that is in many ways "common," has indeed become reality.

Furthermore, it must be said that the people of our continent actually do share a common history, unlike the people of other continents (such as those of the American continent or Australia). However, this past is determined by reference to complex and widespread origins, the welcoming of new elements throughout the course of the centuries, and the interweaving of the diverse origins of those who were already living in Europe. As a metaphor, it is better to think in terms of springs, rivers, and waters which flow into and merge with one another, rather than referring to roots, which, at the end of the day, are always separate from one another. These origins are, primarily, those deriving from Greek lands; secondly, they are the references offered by religious inspiration, in particular Judaeo-Christian.[1]

It is, therefore, on the basis of this history that we can understand just who we are. It is from this perspective that we can truly under-

1 The metaphor of the earth, in which two streams of water flow into each other and merge, is taken from Franz Rosenzweig who, in the Western tradition, refers to a *Zweistromland: a land at the confluence of two separate streams*. See F. Rosenzweig, *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken* (Berlin/New York: Springer, 2011).

stand our identity. However, it has to be said that this is an identity which many wish to forget or that they, often for ideological reasons, feel they must repudiate. I will come back to this point later. The result, in any case, is a lack of reference points, which has left us disorientated.

There are, indeed, many elements, increasingly many, which even today converge to put the European identity in a state of crisis. But today this crisis is more specifically in relation to the large-scale migration from the Global South, which the European governments seem incapable of governing in a cooperative manner.

Europe and the Mediterranean

These migrations appear increasingly to threaten European identity: our identity. Indeed, what scares us nowadays is the fact that what we are being forced to merge with and to deal with is visibly very different from us. Black or dark skin and non-Caucasian traits are increasingly more visible in our cities, and they are found side by side with the somatic, homologated characteristics which until not long ago were prevalent almost everywhere.

Yet, it is not only this visible, external aspect which seems to undermine the idea of a European identity. Indeed, Europe has always been made up of different peoples, crossed by those very differences that it has always tried to govern. How did it succeed? Not by reference to a unitary, monolithic culture, but by sharing the same basic points of reference and a common history. Though there is no single culture nor common language within Europe—and paradoxically, the shared bridge-language belongs to the very nation that recently decided to leave the European Union: Great Britain—there is, however, a basic mutual inspiration, a sense of common derivation from the same origin, from the same source.

This origin, as I mentioned above, involves water. And this is no coincidence, since the Mediterranean—quite literally, etymological-

ly—is a "space between lands." The Mediterranean is, in fact, both a meeting place and point of exchange for whatever the adjacent lands may bring, as well as the setting for their conflicts, which have occurred over and over again throughout history.[2]

Yet today, even this articulate culture with its history for managing differences is now in a state of crisis. The Mediterranean is merely a place of transit, not of sharing. Our common origins are no longer recognized. We have forgotten the plurality of our past. Hence, it is easy for us to turn against it: denying it, rejecting it, ceasing to teach what it has brought to us.

It is not surprising, therefore, that cultures different to ours become attractive: the cultures of the Global South, or those pervaded by an oriental spirituality. Who knows whether we can really understand them? But it is enough for us simply to make some use of them, especially when we no longer believe in our own culture.

This, however, has dangerous consequences. Not so much because it can encourage the adopting of behaviors and fashions that are often somewhat odd, when transferred directly into contexts that are not their own. Rather, it is because in the growing desert of meaning (as Nietzsche would say), extreme religious practices can be imposed, which stimulate equally extreme reactions: resulting in an *escalation* of violence which is unfortunately now manifest. This too is due to an incorrect understanding and an inadequate management of the problem of identity.

The Various Forms of Identity

The theme of identity is, therefore, a central one in today's Europe and in the definition of its future. It is precisely for this reason that it must receive the focus of our full attention. This is vital, because we need to be clear about precisely what kind of mix we are dealing with.

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2 Cf. in this regard Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1993).

Above all, however, we must know what needs to be done, in order that we may try to govern these processes, as opposed to suffering the consequences of them.

Let us, therefore, ask ourselves exactly what is meant by "identity": both in the general sense as well as in the specific cases with which we deal concretely. This, as we shall see, is a complex, ambiguous concept, in that there are multiple meanings.[3]

There are, indeed, three distinct ways of understanding what we call "identity." Three different approaches that can be identified with the help of metaphors. We can distinguish between: a closed, or "wall," identity; a reflected, or "mirror," identity; and, finally, an open identity—open to those transformations which it may withstand and with which it is able to interact in various ways.

The "wall" identity is the one that considers the other simply as something or someone to be rejected. It implies a self-affirmation that is both exclusive and excluding. In other words, there must be a wall between myself and the other in order to guarantee this exclusion. This is the way the issue of identity is experienced by people, for example, with a fundamentalist mentality.

The "mirror," on the other hand, involves a different concept of "identity": less violent but equally hegemonic. In this model the other is considered only in relation to my self-affirmation and to the confirmation of *my* identity. Its function, therefore, is merely to mirror my opinions: opinions that I know from the start to be valid, and that therefore cannot be truly debated. The other, from this perspective, is merely a *sparring partner*, destined to succumb. They play their role and then disappear.

Finally, the "open" identity is established through our relationship with others. It is a relational identity. Only when my identity is established within this relationship is it truly open: open to what may

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3 For further reading on this theme and on the issue of fundamentalisms which I will deal with shortly, see the volume by Adriano Fabris, *Filosofia delle religioni: Come orientarsi nell'epoca dell'indifferenza e dei fondamentalismi* (Rome: Carocci, 2012).

be new in this relationship; ever open to new relationships. Hence, I do not close myself to others, and others are not simply my mirror. Rather, in my very relation to them, I change my own perception of myself and understand who I am. Moreover, I encourage others to do likewise. I do not justify their monolithic nature; I do not allow them to construct a wall; instead, I challenge them through my behavior: I challenge them to open up, to have the courage to interact with me and with others who are like me.

Only if we take this stance does the prospect of integration become possible. Only in this way does everyone's identity develop and grow. In fact, identity is not something static; rather, it is a developing process to which, like it or not, we all make our contribution.

Identity and Fundamentalisms

The above are the identity models present today: both on an individual and on a social level. These categories, however, must be understood and implemented in the correct way. The wrong way, in fact, has disastrous consequences. The wrong way leads, as I have already mentioned, to fundamentalism.

It is important to note that by "fundamentalism" I do not just refer to the religious type. Nor do I consider it to be the fate of just one single type of religion, the monotheistic paradigm, to inevitably suffer the consequences of fundamentalism, as has been asserted recently, in somewhat unilateral theses by certain scholars.[4] Rather, "fundamentalism" is intended as a mentality that is characteristic of many different ways of thinking, all defined by a closure, by a fundamental rigidity that prevents those who adhere to it from accepting the challenge of the other's presence and from really opening up to

4 See, for example, Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

something new. All those positions that reject or devalue productive dialogue with those who think differently, believing that there is no need for such dialogue, can be considered a part of this fundamentalist perspective. Indeed, fundamentalists believe that they are already in possession of the truth and are, therefore, convinced that they have no need for anything.

In short, the fundamentalist mentality is linked to a partial and restricted conception of one's own identity and represents a sort of a pathology that strikes the very relational structure of human beings, closing it in upon itself. Moreover, it leads to an erroneous management, and hence an impoverishment, of our identity.

Even the "mirror" identity, like the "wall," is an outcome to be avoided. It too is immature and narcissistic. It does not permit growth, does not allow us to measure ourselves against that which is new. In brief: both these identity models are sterile. They are old. They block the future. They eliminate hope. Perhaps precisely this is the characteristic of a mentality which is ever more widespread in today's Europe. Thus, once again, we might talk of a "decline of the West."[5]

European Identity as a Relational Identity

It is precisely in this context that we need to recover our identity, our European identity, in the correct way. We need to understand and express this identity as an open and plural identity, appropriate not only for the situation in which we now live, but also for considering what has happened throughout history, albeit with various outcomes. We must do this in such a way that it does not produce an explosion, a dissolution, a decline of our traditions.

To achieve this, we must learn to conduct the right relationships, good relationships. And we must learn to do it right now, in our Eu-

5 Cf. Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich: Patmos Verlag, 2007).

rope. These are relations, as I said, which develop among the different peoples within Europe, but which also concern those who are arriving in Europe today. These are relationships between human beings. We do not meet as abstract entities, we meet as people, we meet as individuals.

Of course, a European identity, today, must also be built on the basis of common goals, goals to be achieved in the future. And this, on closer inspection, is what is often missing. There is no clarity regarding the objectives which, together, the various countries within Europe can work towards. There is a lack of awareness of the historical events that have affected us, for better or for worse. But openness to the future cannot exclude teaching about the past, nor can it exclude a series of choices that we must make now, in the present.

Making sure that the various EU member states have their bank accounts in order can certainly not be considered an adequate goal. Collective efforts cannot be concentrated on the adoption of an increasingly rigid economic policy, nor on the adoption of increasingly unilateral bureaucratic procedures. The symbol of Europe cannot be the monument to the Euro placed in Frankfurt in front of the headquarters of the European Central Bank. This would be a Europe without a soul. It would be a Europe, which is incapable of understanding that the crisis which we are currently experiencing is not purely an economic crisis, perhaps on its way to being resolved, but above all a cultural crisis. It is an identity crisis, that is to say, a crisis regarding the adequate construction of Europe's own identity.

Nor can the notion of Europe as a fortress be considered acceptable: neither in terms of the fortification of common boundaries, nor, given the impossibility of doing so, in terms of individual states wanting to safeguard their sovereignty by restoring former barriers. Fortresses, sooner or later, are conquered. Walls collapse.

Instead, the task today is twofold, and concerns precisely the issue of identity. It is a question of recovering the European identity as an open, relational identity, and then putting it into practice by making sure that this plural relationality, which constitutes Europe in its histo-

ry, is disseminated and spread to other people. That is, it must become fundamental as a model, and as a practice, for those who want to live in Europe, and also for those who want to be welcomed into Europe.

What I am not suggesting is that we should take a specific, distinct standpoint, starting with the conviction that every idea is as valid as any other and must be placed on the same level as all others: what would suffice would be to achieve this goal in a non-conflictual manner and with a just dose of tolerance. However, the spread of fundamentalism demonstrates that this solution—a solution that has become concrete in Anglo-American communitarianism—is not sufficient for avoiding conflicts. European culture, European identity, precisely because it is an "open" identity, *is the only one that can legitimize other cultures*. But to do so, it requires that the latter accept its foundational elements: namely, the dignity of all human beings, the safeguarding of justice, and, above all, the criterion of hospitable universality.

What do I mean by "hospitable universality"? Again, I do not mean the idea of a universality created by one particular culture, one which we might define generally as "Western." What I mean is that only if the criteria and principles developed by Europe during the course of its history appear to be shareable by everyone, and indeed shared by everyone, is it possible for everyone to find space, a common space, for the expression of the specific convictions of each person. Thus: if this European identity presents itself as an opportunity for safeguarding everyone, and becomes diffused, it may assert itself and, since it is an open identity, become universally shared.

If we look to the future, then, we realize that what is called for is the redefinition of our identity. But for this to happen we must be clear about what this identity actually consists of. In short, a European identity, if it is indeed an open identity, can only be a relational identity. It has been built, and must continue to be built, with an awareness of and respect for different traditions. It has always been, and must continue to be. It requires, and indeed must ask, other cultures and traditions to adopt its criteria in order to interact: thus making its universality possible, and reaffirming it as universal.

Ultimately, it is a question of reaffirming and remaining faithful to that identity which is typical of difference and which is created by difference. We are all the same not because we are homogenized by certain shared practices: *we are all the same because we are all different*. Only starting from this position is it possible for hospitality, true hospitality, to be achieved.

I conclude with a metaphor. Let us not make the mistake of destroying our home, of undervaluing it, of despising it: others do not do so. Let us not make the mistake of closing it or barricading ourselves in. Instead, this house must be there, it must be constantly repaired and rebuilt, but it must not have locked doors. If we neglect it, if we do not all work together to keep it in good shape, it will collapse. After all, it is only together, all inhabitants, both old and new, that we can keep this house alive: that we can keep our old Europe alive.

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