

Daniel Cohn-Bendit

Quo vadis Europa...?

"Let his mass conscience assert itself, organise his thinking through propaganda, his leisure and recreation through appropriate measures, and he will belong to you unconditionally, he will even imagine that he is free and that all this is genuine human achievement. Anyone who does not go along with this is treated as a harmful, unusable force and is brutally neutralised. I think that the spread of such an ideology can only ever lead once more to experiments similar to fascism; more astute ... but, in essence and from the human standpoint, as desperate as ever because there is no room for ideas in them...

... Yet the human idea is basically always the same: the only thing that changes is the historical situation in which the idea is realised. The idea is human freedom. The human idea is the idea of human freedom..."

Jan Patocka "Liberté et sacrifices", Millon, p. 46

If, in order to be heard today, the only thing left to us was the language of faith, I would once again be on the side of the "insolents" who refuse to be cowed and to give way to the arguments of authority and who untiringly "preach" faith in freedom.

If we had to resign ourselves to speaking the protean language of identity-based fanaticism, be it nationalist, sovereignist, culturalist, religious, ethnic etc., I would be with the "fundamentalists" of "human dignity", not out of idolatry, but for the simple reason that, from now on, there will always be a "witness", there will always be a person to recognise violations of his rights, to feel in revolt the violence of abuse of power.

You would be right to find my words disorientating, not to say paradoxical. But the force of paradox is to unsettle us in our sense of what is self-evident so that we take a fresh look at what, at first sight, seems to be common sense. It forces us to go out of ourselves and it stimulates reflection. It is a good tool for the exercise of decentring, raising issues about the notion of identity. Paradox challenges us. It "provokes". And it is perhaps for that reason too that I find it so interesting.

Some may also think that I am going a little too far off the subject...

I believe, on the contrary, that returning to, and emphasising, a certain number of principles and fundamental values can help us to understand just how closely linked they are to our European identity.

And also to what extent this forces us to rethink – without having to repudiate them, on the contrary – our specific national, cultural and linguistic identities, to project ourselves into the idea of a “post-national identity” as expounded by, among others, the philosophers J Habermas and Jean-Marc Ferry.

Insofar as the criteria for feeling that one belongs to the European Union – in other words, a sense of a specific European Union identity – are not similar in nature to those on which national identities are founded, their effect is not to increasingly singularise the European identity by reproducing the “nationalist” pattern, but rather to reveal it in its universalist dimension.

It is this very radical direction which is taken by the “Laeken declaration on the future of the European Union” when it states that “the European Union’s one boundary is democracy and human rights”.

Furthermore, there is nothing in the founding treaties of the European Union which allows us to base the European identity on cultural or religious criteria.

We may therefore observe a recurrent misunderstanding of the principles on which the EU political project is established.

A particular illustration of this misunderstanding was provided at the time of the Convention which met to draft the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

But what illustrates it best is all the discussion surrounding Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership. I chaired the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee for several years and I have to say that the abundance of arguments raised demonstrated clearly to me all the uncertainty surrounding the notion of European identity.

To be able to state categorically, as some do, that Turkey is not European, one would need to be able to assert the existence of a single European culture. Yet nothing is less obvious!

I feel that one of the best arguments for taking this debate forward is that of the philosopher Jean-Marc Ferry.

In “*La République crépusculaire*”, he shows how European equivocation over Turkey’s candidacy undermines the credibility of the official criteria for membership of the European Union, namely the Copenhagen criteria.

In so doing, he introduces a highly enlightening distinction between “historical Europe” and the “EU political project” He defines “historical Europe” as a “geographical reality embodying a historical heritage which confers on it a cultural or civilisational identity”.

As for the European Union, it is a “political construction whose identity is not a given, and that identity must be reflexive... Its aim is to build a political Europe... It does not seek to obscure the Christian identity or any other heritage of Europe. It has simply devised membership criteria which are not prejudged by Europe’s cultural characteristics.”

And as he goes on to explain, only a post-national and post-identity (in the traditional sense of identity) European identity can correspond to this idea of the EU political project, because “the project is not linked to heritage in the same way for a post-nationalist identity as for a national identity”.

This European identity is therefore of a new type. It implies a decentring in relation to our common heritage with a view to its reflexive re-appropriation. The European identity therefore calls for real “reconstruction” work.

Consequently, if it is considered that the idea of European identity involves an “*Aufhebung*” (ie transcending while preserving the plurality which it transcends) of national identity, no attempt to erect cultural or national identity as a barrier can be legitimate.

Excessive emphasis on a cultural, religious national or other identity results automatically in discrimination towards all those who are not part of that specific human community. Furthermore, it exposes cultures and religions, among others, to political exploitation. Now, any political enterprise which establishes its power by giving priority to certain particularities of identity is effectively contesting the universality of human rights.

We must therefore regard the particularities, and particularisms, of identity as being as many basic modes of human expression, which therefore, by this “mere fact”, requires that they should be guaranteed by law. This is a guarantee which cannot simply be formal but must be effectively implemented.

And if there is indeed an article in the Treaties which would deserve to be taught systematically at all stages of the education of European citizens, that is Article 2, which says:

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

That is the crux of the challenge of the European identity!

We must therefore understand that the European democratic identity is fundamentally political. It is intrinsically bound up with the EU political project. Yet, by definition, the project cannot correspond to something given.

The European identity is therefore an identity “under construction”. It espouses the contours of a political project which corresponds to a democracy of a new type: post-national democracy, which might also be referred to as “post-national democracy of the plurality of European democracies”. This “meta”-democracy being formed to some extent by retaining “only” the principles and structure of European democratic states.

In other words, the essential feature of the multinational community formed by the European Union is diversity, which therefore demands respect for the principle of pluralism.

Accordingly, if the European identity – which is complex in essence and uncomfortable by nature – has fundamental links to the EU political project, what about the political project itself? The European malaise perhaps lies essentially at this level.

Might the European malaise not be understood as a state of oscillation between the cynicism of those who feel so disillusioned by Europe that they see it as a mere instrument of power no different from any other, and the hope of those who intuit the ideal of human achievement underlying the EU project?

Viewed from this angle, the European malaise might also be interpreted as the feeling of being dispossessed of a project with which everyone could identify.

The European democratic ideal has become such a cliché that it has lost its force and become, as it were, “derealised” in the literally existentialist sense of the term.

Europe is increasingly experienced as the place of broken promises. It must be said that its democratic powerlessness is indeed a source of disappointment. It is flagrant at international level. It is obvious on an internal level, as witness the examples of Haider in Austria, Berlusconi’s media empire in Italy and Orbán in Hungary. And it is palpable in the sense of injustice arising from, in particular, social discrimination.

And yet, if Article I of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is to be believed: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.

A crisis of confidence is inevitable in this impossible contortion to reconcile the European democratic ideal – informed by the idea of equality – with the reality of social injustice, the aberration of a Charter of Fundamental Rights covering all European citizens except for the Czechs, the Poles and the British, procedures which give certain opinions priority over others (national referenda, unanimous voting in the Council), a continent whose states engage in economic and fiscal warfare, above all making no provision for solidarity mechanisms, a carefully concocted austerity programme which exacerbates social hardship, nations unwilling to give themselves the means to act together at European level

(The EU budget – which the states of Europe, at yet another tragic gathering, saw fit to reduce – in fact corresponds to 1% of European wealth. To give you an idea, the proportion of national wealth used by the central budget of federal states is 10-20%. The latter percentage is that of the current US federal budget, which underwent a huge increase when Roosevelt set about taking his country out of the Great Depression. But in Europe, the “cultural exception” prevails. So it is decided that, in times of crisis, savings must be made on the Community budget so that individual nations can have greater freedom of action. After all, the European budget for 28 countries is barely 3 times less than the budget needed to run France!!!!) ...

The list could be very long indeed.

Through their nationalist attitudes, European leaders paint a sad picture of their own distrust towards the European project and their partners. Through their European policies on a nation-state scale, they obstruct European post-national democracy and cast doubt on its values.

And to top it all, their solutions are unworkable and appear anachronistic in relation to the continental and intercontinental reality of the century's problems.

What is commonly known as the crisis of legitimacy must be taken seriously because it undermines our identities from the inside.

It is democratically vital that the European project carried by the various political players should be given more public exposure, particularly from the angle of the response it provides to globalisation and the destabilisation it brings with it.

Euro-scepticism is of course a source of concern, but the conservatism of European leaders is equally so. Because while some may think that individual nations can go it alone, it is nevertheless true that those who believe in Europe are thwarted by the reality of their powerlessness. Traditional “Euro-nationalism” is losing credibility because of the widening gap between proclaimed values and the reality of the world. Europe has ended up looking like a *raison d'Etat*.

The crisis of meaning across the European continent is the outcome of the political “no man's land” intensively cultivated over the last few decades by a ruling class which, when it is not Euro-sceptic, is Euro-nationalist by political tradition. The conservatism of European politicians (on both right and left) is therefore not always ill-intentioned. But the fact is that it causes substantial damage through the feeling of powerlessness which it fosters.

It has therefore become vital to reactivate our political imagination. What the European Union needs is a dissident political culture capable of updating the idea of post-national European democracy and the corresponding European identity. Europeans need a political imagination equal to the European Utopia, that “dream of reason”.

The need for “irreverence” towards the intellectual conservatism of political circles is all the more urgent because exploitation of identity is becoming increasingly widespread and unscrupulous.

And in my view it would be totally irresponsible to count on the undying loyalty of the electorate, who, disillusioned, might end up no longer believing in democracy itself.