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**In Search of an Identity  
for Europe**

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*Marco Bifulco*

## **In Search of an Identity for Europe**

[One should aim to be like the great amateurs of the 1600s and 1700s. It would certainly be very difficult. But the specialist loses his capability of understanding reality.]

The search for an identity is the search for an essence. The purpose of this paper is to reveal “that something called Europe”. The task is difficult but not impossible as long as one is convinced that it can be accomplished, just as that “something called Greece” - τὸ Ἑλληνικόν - existed in that grouping of enemy-and/or-lukewarm-friendly states that was classic Greece.

The term itself, “Europe,” originates in Greek mythology, but I won’t start my research that far back. By Europe I mean modern Europe, in the form it started to take on from the Protestant Reformation and the discovery of the Americas onwards. In that historical period, Spain cast out first the Moors and then the Jews from the Spanish peninsula while at the same time, it started to conquer Latin America. It wasn’t a good start, rather an ill-omened one, and a foreboding prelude to the tragedy of the modern age.

The conquest cleared the path for the expansion of European civilization throughout the entire globe, while the expulsion of foreign peoples from within its boundaries represented the definitive sunset of the idea of one single humanity, in which different cultures and religions could live together in peace (the Roman Mediterranean myth). Europe was building its own identity by discovering that which was different, inside and outside.

Curiously, just as Europe became aware of its civilizing mission, forces of fragmentation erupted from its center: with Luther who, in 1517, posted his incendiary theses onto the doors of the Wittenberg cathedral.

Modern Europe proved to be a paradox right from the start. Its mission to civilize all of humanity coincided with the disappearance of medieval religious unity and, with the beginning of the age of great nations, of the dream of political unity. These are contradictions we still live with today with the dawning of the opposite, albeit not incompatible, scenarios of globalization and fragmentation.

Trying to figure out the identity of that paradox called European history, where the rational and the irrational alternate with each other continuously, is an attempt that should be undertaken with Socratic irony, with the awareness that the subject is serious but also that theses of argumentation are weak. I will here attempt to reconstruct a historical and philosophical path through the ages with inevitable over-interpretations and manipulations of reality. Coherence would imply silence.

This essay is written while Europe is living *de facto* through a constituent phase, which the author believes to be one of the inevitable consequences of the end of the cold war. For the first time in its history, Europe has the possibility of forming a single political entity that is not based on the predominance of a single nation but on the recognition of interdependent relationships and on a common wealth of values. If we want this process to succeed we will have to fully understand the origins we have in common so that we can imagine a European society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***The identities: a metaphysical reconstruction***

That modernization was, at least in the beginning, a European process, is a widely acknowledged fact. It therefore makes sense to start our research with the Protestant Reformation and the discovery of America, as symbolic moments that express the contradictions of modernity: this moment's universal vocation in its recognition of individuality. Moreover, the religious pluralism that is considered to be at the root of modern constitutionalism, translated into a chronic conflict between the sovereignty of the prince and that of God, a problem to which the Lutheran principle "*cuius regio eius religio*" could only partially and temporarily solve. Hobbes clearly realized the seriousness of the issue:

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This difficulty hath not been of very great antiquity in the world. [...] The difficulty therefore remaineth amongst, and troubleth those Christiana only, to whom is allowed to take for the sense of the Scripture that which they make thereof, either by their own private interpretation, or by the interpretation of such as are not called thereunto by public authority”<sup>1</sup>.

Hobbes found in the idea of “Jesus is the Christ”, the only possibility of recomposing the fracture between the religious and the political sphere, in search for an “overlapping consensus” amongst all families of Christianity (a successful formula that in the United States of today still carries a legitimizing value). The contrast between political power and religious faith paved the way for a new kind of legitimization of power, one based on individual rationality, which Hobbes himself coded in “a clear and specific way”.

### ***Legal positivism***

Once Reformation has been identified as the historical event that allowed the modern age to break in, it would be helpful to take a step back and ask what its sacrificial victim, tradition, stands for. In order to do this, one needs to start with the lesson of Thomas Aquinas, thanks to which Aristotle’s thought (which had become accessible in its entirety thanks to contact with the Arab civilization) was rediscovered and assimilated on the part of Christianity.

Thomas Aquinas deemed philosophy to be the prerequisite to faith. Man, in questioning himself concerning the world, must start from reason, i.e. from those argumentation theses on which all must agree. It is from this rational basis that is shared by all men that the first universal results can be achieved and the groundwork for further theological in-depth study laid. Thomas Aquinas’ is an appeal, an invitation to go back and start over with “rational” truths.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Pasquino, *Political Theory and threat*, p. 30, in *Political Order*, Nomos XXXVIII, Ed. I. Shapiro and R. Hardin, New York University Press, New York and London, 1993

But why call Thomas Aquinas' appeal for rationality, tradition? Tradition no longer represents the practices and the hierarchies of the church (*ecclesiae auctoritas*), the conciliar decrees, the Popes' decretals, but the *auctoritas* of the great Greek philosophers, with Aristotle's undisputed leadership. Luther deliberately denounces both "traditions": the religious tradition - false and diabolic in such as it did not faithfully reflect the Gospel to the letter - as well as the philosophic tradition:

"My suggestion would be that the books of Aristototele *Physica*, *Metaphysica*, *De Anima*, which until now were deemed to be the best, be abolished together with all the others that speak of natural things, since nothing can be learned from natural things, nor from spiritual things"<sup>2</sup>.

Not by chance, Francis Bacon, the founder of modern science, will state the same. To Bacon, Aristotle "reduced many advanced intellects and free spirits to slavery, was never in any way useful to humanity"<sup>3</sup>. The fact is that the Church, after initial skepticism, made Thomas Aquinas' doctrine its own and this explains the common condemnation of the "*traditio*".

For Aristototele knowledge arose from the observation of nature. It was a method quite different from modern empirical science. No experiments were used and no tools were employed to support the senses; the experience consisted in immediate sensorial observation. The perception process was conceived by Aristototele as a prevalingly passive function: the simple sensation is deemed to always hold true, whereas the judgments we pass on the perceptive material are considered erroneous.

On this groundwork, Aristotle built a science that starts with perception and from which the true assumptions can be derived. It is an act of pure rational intuition: these are inductive truths. Syllogism, applied to these premises, makes implicit truths explicit.

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<sup>2</sup> G. Reale and D. Antiseri, *Il Pensiero Occidentale dalle Origini a Oggi 2*, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia, 1983, p. 75

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 246

The object of observation, nature, is not a casual and disorderly grouping, that man tries hard to recompose. It is rather an orderly cosmos, the work of a form of intelligence. It consists not only of “efficient” causes but also of “final” causes - “The nature of each thing is the goal towards which it strives”. Causes do not lie outside the objects or in linked events; they are “internal” causes. The process of procreation of the species is, for example, an internal agent acting in the thing that produces itself<sup>4</sup>. Observing nature means understanding its purposes - discovering the natural and rational order of things. What can be derived from this, is that the social (natural) order, which is also the object of the philosopher’s observation, is based on a balance among the inborn inclinations of men (final causes), which are different according to their position within society. The purpose of the slave is to serve his master, while the head of the family, the citizen has very different duties towards the *polis*. The task of justice is to give each one his own (*suum cuique tribuere*). It defines the order of human society, the distribution of goods according to the principle of *proportional equality*, and it guarantees correct dealings in trade.

The laws set down are inspired by the unwritten principles of nature. It is a type of work that is eternal - observation does not bestow definitive knowledge on us, but always temporary knowledge. It is nature itself that changes; “some things are variable by nature”. Law thus derives both from nature and from conventions which complete the general principles.

Thomas Aquinas brought this view of the world, based on a natural cosmologic order, into Christian doctrine, making it coexist with the Christian God. The *lex naturalis* becomes part of the *lex aeterna* (God’s rational plan known only to the blessed in which man participates - *participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura*). Acting according to the natural laws means being rational and it is typical of man to be inclined to act according to reason. The legislator derives his positive right from the *lex naturalis*. Consequently, it is essential that human law be inspired by natural law since a

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<sup>4</sup> “Potential” expresses a substrate’s predisposition, its potential in taking on a determined form; the “act” express the full completion of the form in a determined substrate and hence, the essence of the thing.

human law in conflict with natural law *does not exist as a law*. It would “no longer be law, but corruption of law”.

Thomas Aquinas attributes revealed divine law a double task. First of all, it strengthens our weakened conscience even in those areas that would be accessible *per se* to our natural knowledge. It is a confirmation function for rational truths. But this can't be all! The specific purpose of divine law is to instruct us in things concerning our salvation.

Aristotle's concept of order and natural law, which was taken up by Thomas Aquinas, faced attack from the modernists. Actually its refusal was the essence of modernity. The concept was offset against both the notions of subjective law and of legal positivism. This was a process that through various authors, among whom we find William Ockham, Luther, Calvin and Cartesius, found its utmost and perfect expression in Hobbes. We need to retrace this route if we wish to find a substance for “that something called Europe”. In fact, with the repudiation of natural law (not to be confused with natural rights, of subjective nature), the modern world, through the Enlightenment, will develop a planning attitude that is not divine, but human. This became possible only thanks to the progressive erosion of the doctrine of cosmologic natural law. On the contrary, the goal of this new planning attitude was precisely liberation and emancipation from an order that is no longer deemed to be “natural”, but unjust and illegitimate.

William Ockham, called the prince of nominalists, fought strongly against the thomistic doctrine, as well as against the Roman Church. After a long period of time spent in prison in Avignon he found refuge under the temporal power of the Emperor.

Ockham's world was *legal positive*. It was a world born of an arbitrary, creative act, from God's absolute creative freedom. Recognizing the rational nature of this act is wrong. It is an act of human arrogance. God's will is not at the mercy of human rationality nor is the world structured according to necessary relationships that can be discovered through a metaphysical process.



The attack on thomistic philosophy develops within the dispute on the Universals<sup>5</sup>. What type of existence do the Universals have? For Aristotle individuals indicate real substances that exist in autonomous and primary form. The (Universal) predicates express the qualities of substances and their existence is secondary, in the sense that they exist to the extent in which they can be autonomously and primarily applied to individuals. Some attributes express fundamental characteristics, i.e. a belonging to a species. The species or form (*eidos*) defines the essence of substance, the “what that is” (*quod qui est*). Logic and science therefore move at the level of species-essences.

The existence of Universals makes a cosmologic reconstruction of reality possible. Entities’ *final causes* can be discovered. The world and nature have an intrinsic order; throughout eternity they perpetuate a plan, a design that is the best, because it is the only one possible.

The relationship between forms, their harmony, is what is studied. The external world is not a chaotic dusting of atoms, it entails a system of classification (species essences) that comprises all individuals of nature, a system of relationships. This is why for Aristotle, law was “*suum cuique tribuere*”. Man’s Good is to follow his nature, rationally and freely. The essence of a thing is thus having to be its own good.

Ockham denied the universals any existence. He defined them as signs and logic symbols. He transferred the characteristics of *being* to the conceptual level. Only individuals exist, the Universals are not characteristics, they are only generalizations. Thought takes the place of *being* (here one can begin to discern the path that idealism will later follow). The world becomes a grouping of individual elements that have no true links between them in terms of nature or essence. The entire system of necessary and ordered causes, that made up the structure of the Platonic and Aristotelian cosmos yields to a fragmented universe of many isolated individuals.

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<sup>5</sup> The *Universals* are terms that can be predicates for a multitude of other terms. Socrates is an individual because he cannot be the predicate for any subject other than himself (Socrates is Socrates). Man is an Universal because he is the predicate for many subjects: Socrates is a man, Aristotle is a man ...

The Church, for example, becomes the aggregation of the multitude of separate individuals that are the faithful (*Ecclesia sunt fideles*). The catastrophic consequences of this vision are not difficult to see. Hierarchies, classes, order, and totality disappear. Everywhere, like a sprinkling of dots, simply individuals; no hierarchy and no order is real.

Consequently, the origins of law can only be traced back to the positive will of individuals, not to the order of things. Legal positivism is the offspring of Nominalism.

The precepts of the decalogue are not natural and therefore, not rationally valid, but they are mandatory because they are positive; they are God's will.

Luther took up and spread this vision of the world, albeit within his doctrine. For Luther as well, the source of law is "arbitrary command". Aristotle is "the godless refuge of papists. He is about as close to theology as darkness is to light. His ethics are the worst enemy of grace"<sup>6</sup>.

But God's word cannot rule the world which is prone to sin. "The world cannot be ruled according to the Scriptures: God's word enjoys far too little respect for that to be possible"<sup>7</sup>. Thus reference must be made to the positive laws promulgated by sovereigns. Nothing sounded sweeter to the ears of German princes thirsting after sovereignty at the time when states were being formed.

Hobbes, thanks to his theory of the social contract, presented a more complete version of legal positivism. For Hobbes, in the state of nature, a society does not yet exist (for Aristotle society was a state of nature); there are only individuals with a right to defend themselves. Here, the influence of Ockham is clear and it is also clear how individualism gave rise to the concept of subjective law.

Individuals are clearly responsible and have a free and rational will of their own (a universal extension of the characteristics of an elite of enlightened

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 78

<sup>7</sup> M. Villey, *La Formazione del Pensiero Giuridico Moderno*, Jaca Book, Milano, p. 258

individuals, an elite to which Hobbes surely felt he belonged). Such individuals relinquished their right to resist the sovereign and their original right to all things. There is no real agreement; the liberty of the sovereign extends as far as the liberty of the subject recedes. It is a government of responsible men who have chosen. Liberty persists in that which is natural and therefore inalienable (it cannot be subject to contract): free conscience and self-defense. We therefore have civil rights limited by law that are exclusive and guaranteed by the State. The Leviathan is created for the individual and the social pact is a rational, self-interested calculation of the individual carried out so that he can assert his natural rights. The sovereign will *rationally* abide by the contract for his own convenience.

With Hobbes what I consider the first course of modernity reaches completion: liberation from tradition, which here stands for that group of thomistic doctrines accepted by the Catholic Church. It is the course of the “*modern route*”, i.e. of a new vision of the world, a radical revolution that, starting with the Enlightenment, conceives a planning attitude of its own - the fight against the philosophic and religious tradition turns social in the end. New forces enter the play thanks to the development of economic capitalism. Tradition becomes a hazy concept; it changes its appearance throughout the centuries in a perpetual clash between the new and the old in which the meanings of terms are deformed as it suits the players. The natural order of things is denounced by the Enlightenment period as a heap of mistakes, superstitions, deceptions and falsities, defended only by “aristocracies” that are steadfast in safeguarding their own privileges. The Aristotelian sciences themselves prove to be trivial superstitions in the face of the spreading of the new experimental method. History suddenly accelerates.

### ***The Project***

The Enlightenment proved capable of ridiculing the apparent absurdity of the ancient order. Intellectuals became the voice of the quest for a new world. But was the human society capable of offering it? The centuries that followed were characterized by the inability to give man’s society stability

in the face of the inexorable decline of the order that had been so arduously built after the fading of the Roman empire.

Kant defined Enlightenment as that process during which humanity started using its discretion without subjecting itself to any *authority* (tradition). In *What is enlightenment?* he asked himself if humanity is living in an enlightened era: the answer was negative. Kant was nevertheless convinced he was living in an “enlightening” era.

If it is now asked whether we at present live in a *enlightened*, the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*. As things are at present, we still have a long way to go before men as a whole can be in a position (or can even be put into a position) of using their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters, without outside guidance.<sup>8</sup>

I underlined “can even be put” in order to highlight the central role intellectuals played during the Enlightenment period. It was the intellectual’s task to enlighten the *public*, and, where this was not possible due to general indifference, to enlighten the despot.

*Popular enlightenment* is the public instruction of the people upon their duties and rights towards the state to which can be derived from ordinary common sense, their obvious exponents and interpreters among the people will not be officials appointed by the state, but free teachers of right, i.e. the philosophers. The latter, on account of the very freedom which they allow themselves, are a stumbling-block to the state, whose only wish is to rule; they are accordingly given the appellation of ‘enlighteners’, and decried as a menace to the state. And yet they do not address themselves in familiar tones to the *people* (who themselves take little or no notice of them and their writings), but in *respectful* tones to the state, which is thereby implored to take a rightful needs of the people to heart. And if a whole people wishes to present its grievance (*gravamen*), the only way to do this is by publicity.<sup>9</sup>

Kant synthesizes the *plan* of Enlightenment in one single sentence: to liberate man from a *state of minority*, a project the intellectuals take on and that

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<sup>8</sup> I. Kant, *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 58

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186

can only be carried out with the collaboration of the State. In order to allow intellectuals to liberate humanity from its deplorable state Kant asked for but one thing: freedom of expression. Freedom of expression would have made the auto-emancipation of intellectuals possible and they, in turn, would have made the emancipation of the masses possible. The task intellectuals set out to accomplish was that of lifting the “very subtle veil of mystery”. The mixed English constitution, for example, was in Kant’s eyes “a mendacious form of publicity [that] deceives the people with the illusion that the monarchy is *limited* by a law which emanates from them, while their representatives, won over by bribery, secretly subject them to an *absolute monarch*”<sup>10</sup>. Evidently quite a distance from Montesquieu.

Freedom of expression would have allowed the beginning of an enlightening process:

For there will always be a few who think for themselves, even among those appointed by the guardians of the common mass. Such guardians, once they have themselves thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will disseminate the spirit of rational respect for personal value and for the duty of all men to think for themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Kant was by nature cautious, although his thought was bound to enable much more radical developments. He limited himself to asking for the “most inoffensive of all liberties”, whilst at the same time, emphasising that it was the duty of all subjects to obey their sovereign. He always condemned any type of rebellion. Acknowledging the right to rebellion would have led to a permanent, albeit potential, state of revolution.

The ideas of Kant and of the Enlightenment thinkers soon went through radical transformation. The State and intellectuals would become the two pillars of a new plan. The drastic social changes that followed the Industrial Revolution, no longer placed an indifferent audience, but concentrated masses, at the disposal of the intellectuals. These masses were ready to fight to claim their right to take a greater part in the economic and political life of society. At the same time, the State, after the Napoleonic wars, be-

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55

came more capable of regulating the civil life of its citizens. This contributed in creating a suitable climate for the conception of very ambitious plans.

Denouncing the “falsity” of traditions soon took on an extent that had been hitherto unthinkable. One no longer fought for religious freedom but for freedom from religion. The divine, for Feuerbach, was a simple illusion; the existence of God a representation of humanity’s alienation. Social order became a conspiracy, to the detriment of the majority, of that enlightened elite that had given life to the social contract. The contractual nature of order underlined the existence of the “outcast”, of those who didn’t sign and who inevitably felt betrayed, humiliated and condemned. If man creates his laws and if there is no natural order of things to be respected, how can the eschatologic ambitions of intellectuals and the aspirations of the disinherited who are placed in the productive system, be kept at bay? The dizzying utopia of human emancipation was thus spread, in the awareness of equality among men. The ambition was to recompose the world that had crumbled into a group of individuals in permanent contrast with each other.

Mending this laceration with the help of human discretion, creating an elementary, rational and unified world in which multiplicity and contradictions would disappear, in which conflicts and differences would dissolve and law and politics would vanish - all this suddenly becomes a possibility in man’s development. God’s plan that was to be accomplished at the end of time is substituted by man’s plan. Humanity takes it upon itself to overcome its limitations: “Only when[...] the individual man in his empirical life, in his individual work, in his individual relationships, *has become a member of the human race*; only when man has acknowledged and organized the *forces propres* as social forces [...] only then will human emancipation have been achieved”<sup>12</sup>.

The desire to recover the ancient world’s unity is evident. Not harmonious unity (proportional egalitarianism), but total, absolute unity because it comes forth from the equality of individuals and that can lead to nothing else than

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<sup>12</sup> D. Settembrini, *Due ipotesi per il socialismo in Marx ed Engels*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1974, p.5

equality of conditions. Thanks to the rational use of scientific knowledge, humanity one day will be able to allow all its members to develop their individual possibilities, achieving the Prometheian dream of capsizing the hardest of all laws of nature: the one that calls for the subjection of the weakest to the strongest. The goal is the emancipation from nature itself, a nature that is contrasted by human culture.

Any other form of social structure would be a conspiracy by the few to the detriment of the majority. The new aristocracy, the “aristocracy created by business” [Tocqueville], will prove to be as cruel as the ancient one.

New lies are added to the old; the Enlightenment intellectual’s job is never done. The objective is no longer Kant’s liberating man from his laziness and cowardice, from his the lack of decision and courage in making use of his intellect, it is rather freeing him from material conditions and exploitation. The inspiring principle is an idea of politics based on reason and not on facts. A type of reason that should not be confused with the sum of maximising individual reasons nor with the natural reason to which man can gain access, by reflecting on things. The new type of reason is a creative act of man and it can change reality. It is an attempt to overcome Ockham’s atomism, giving the Subject a creative value. The Aristotelian and Platonic forms are recovered, but being thought and not essence they are acquired by man, taking on *movement* and therefore, planning capabilities.

In Anglo-Saxon countries, the course taken by Hobbes was developed and moderated. Attention falls on the need to moderate and control power, limiting the extent of the sovereign’s power of attorney. The *Glorious Revolution* gave back the country’s lost social stability, thanks to a compromise between aristocracy and the emerging *bourgeois* groups. The existence of *Common law* (it too modernized) in which the action of rational agents itself creates a spontaneous order, surely facilitated the acceptance of Hobbes’ doctrine.

Since law is essentially a discovery process, the juridical rule will normally incorporate the rules of behavior which are actually followed by individuals in their interaction. As well explained by David Hume, these rules emerge as the result of *repeated* interaction under different

circumstances. They are adopted out of many alternative rules tried because they are those who best serve each individual.<sup>13</sup>

Common law is the sum of individuals' rational and voluntary actions whose effects are consecrated by law. Natural law is reduced to the natural rights of atomised individuals (to the life, liberty and to the things they have procured through their work) who create the law by joint action. There is no need to overcome Ockham's atomism, on the contrary, it is exalted as a "natural" and spontaneous order.

The existence of the "rational" man - the combination of an individual, liberty and reason - is the myth of liberalism; an individual who no longer wishes to discover the essence of things but wants to transform them to subjugate them. A man of this type must not be protected from manipulation, from deceit and exploitation but from the power of coercion<sup>14</sup>, from the force of violence, the only type of force his reason cannot oppose. The role of intellectuals, as well as that of the State, is consequently reduced. The "individuals" are perfectly capable of defending themselves against external manipulations, of trying to achieve happiness and their emancipation project their way. There is no longer a need for help from free thinkers, for the reformation of consciences, but only a need for a government that leaves civil society live. A position different from that of Kant, for whom a revolution "will never bring about a real reform in the way of thinking. New prejudices, similar to the old, will serve the purpose of guiding the great crowd of those who do not think"<sup>15</sup>.

Locke's philosophy was surely the *manifesto* of the project of individual emancipation, an alternative project to that of collective emancipation of Kantian and Enlightenment inspiration. Man is driven by his desire to be

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<sup>13</sup> A. M. Petroni, Who will regulate Internet?, Angelo M. Petroni, Lecture, 1997

<sup>14</sup> "There remains a categoric distinction between economy as 'science of trade' and 'science of politics' or 'politics'. The latter, i.e. politics as an accademic research discipline, is attributed to the entire sector of non-voluntary relationships among individuals, those relationships that imply power or coercion." Quote from J. M. Buchanan, Stato, mercato e libertà, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1989, p. 198

<sup>15</sup> I. Kant, Political Writings, p. 55



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happy. Happiness is not the realisation of his nature (final cause) as in Aristotle but, empirically, the quest for pleasure and the escape from pain. In this quest the limit is the natural right of other individuals: “no one shall cause damage to others’ lives, health, freedom and possessions”. Laws bring about a system of punishment and reward so as to disincentivate collision among liberties.

But who, if not the individual himself, is the judge of his own pleasure? Happiness can only be a determination of individual judgment. According to T. L. Pangles view

“... while humans can agree on the supreme goodness of pleasure, they cannot agree on which specific modes of pleasure are most intense or greatest. Indeed “even what they themselves have enjoyed with great pleasure and delight at one time, has proven insipid or nauseous at another”. From this follows the mortal failing of classical political philosophy: “the mind has a different relish, as well the Palate; and you will as fruitlessly endeavour to delight all men with Riches ... as you would to satisfy all Men’s Hunger with Cheese or Lobsters ... hence it was, I think, that the Philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether *Summum Bonum* consist in Riches, or bodily Delights, or Virtue, or Contemplation”,<sup>16</sup>.

Montesquieu, whilst researching the principles that inspire all societies, was the first to perceive the enormous extent of the Anglo-Saxon cultural revolution:

Every previous tradition type of civil society can be seen to depend for its functioning on a particular spring or principle that is the very soul of each type of civil society: this principle proves on closer examination to be a specific passion or structure of passions, a veritable “modification of the soul”, that must be instilled and made to predominate in the heart of each citizen or subject. In the emerging commercial republic governed by the checks and balances of the separation of powers, the animating force is of an entirely different kind: “all the passion being liberated there, the hatred, the envy, the jealousy, the ardour to enrich and distinguish oneself, would appear in all their full extent: and if it were otherwise, the State would be like a man struck down with illness, who has no passions at all because he has no

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<sup>16</sup> T. L. Pangle, *Human Nature and the Constitution*, in *Confronting the Constitution*, Ed. A Bloom, The AEI Press, Washington DC, 1990, p. 50

power at all". The new kind of commercial society emerging in England and elsewhere is one in which the inhabitants are least coerced, least "modified" in their souls, least artificially "educated": "each individual, always independent, would follow to a great extent his caprices and fantasies".<sup>17</sup>

Individual emancipation is the carrying out of an individual plan, that cannot be determined *a priori*. And what is even more important, the project can be achieved through own, natural means, thanks to the action of individual reason.

We therefore have the theoretical and historical co-existence of three possible worlds, one inspired by natural reason (classic), one inspired by universal reason (human) and one inspired by individual reason (human). These three worlds relate to natural order, to the plan for collective emancipation and to the myth of individual emancipation. These are obviously three *ideal* types whose action, carries a great deal of relevance in human conscience even today. The presumed death of ideologies refers only to their explicit dimension.

## ***Nihilism***

After the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars even the supporters of the ancient order had to call on the modern state (as it had evolved in the century of Absolutism - Toqueville's *ancien regime*), as the sole possible tutor of order. Once all appeals on natural order (whose instrumental use had been clearly denounced by the Enlightenment) lost momentum, nothing but irrationalism remained as the sole source of legitimacy for the aristocratic order.

Bismarck was surely the political man who had most clearly understood the meaning of irrationalism as a legitimate source of power:

"How one can live in orderly fashion - do one's share and give each one his own - without faith in a religion revealed, in a God who wants

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28

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good, in a supreme judge and in a life beyond death, I cannot not comprehend”.

“If we take this character away from the State, [...] as [...] contrasting the ideas of Communists, for example, on the immoral character of property.”

“For in fact, when not to a divine command, why should I subject myself to these Hohenzollern? A Swabian family that is not better than mine and for which I care nothing.”<sup>18</sup>

Irrationalism as a political doctrine was already present in Luther<sup>19</sup> who, from the irrationality of faith, derived the irrationality of political order. However, in the 1800s, this idea took on a Nihilistic value, due to the (often implicit) recognition of the relativity of any dogma. The sovereign is he who decides “on the state of exception, he who is capable of playing intrinsic legitimacy against legality, i.e. of using such undetermined concepts as ‘security and political order’, ‘danger’, ‘state of need’, ‘emergency measures’, ‘offenses against the State and the constitution’, ‘conciliatory spirit’, ‘vital interests’ [...]”<sup>20</sup>.

On the Catholic front, De Maistre, the French Restoration philosopher who was to become the spokesperson of this idea: only a supernatural force can grant an explanation for Creation and guarantee a stable government.

Prejudice - what else could one call it after the Enlightenment period - became the source of legitimisation of order. De Maistre prescribes that men should yield to prejudice: prejudice does not reason and national prejudice is the strongest.

The full recognition of the limitations of man and of the tragic nature of his existence is the source of inspiration for De Maistre’s extremism (as E. M. Cioran writes):

Persuaded as they are of the futility of reform, of the vanity and the heresy of a better solution, reactionaries would like to save human

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<sup>18</sup> L. Gall, *Bismarck*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1982, p. 47-48

<sup>19</sup> “it is not wise for anyone who wishes to be Christian to oppose one’s Government, however just or unjust. Nothing is better than obeying and serving all those who are our superiors”; G. Sabine, *Storia delle Dottrine Politiche*, Etas Libri, 1988, p. 275

<sup>20</sup> C. Galli, *Genealogia della Politica*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1996, p. 335

beings from the lacerations and the hardships of hope, from the anguish of an illusionary research: they should settle for the acquisition. They are exhorted to abdicate anxiety in order to abandon themselves to the sweetness of stagnation, and, opting for an irrevocably official state of affairs, they should choose between the instinct of self-preservation and a taste for tragedy<sup>21</sup>”.

De Maistre exalts the dogmatism of Catholicism. Of Lutheranism he denigrates the admission of free will: “politically, Mohammedanism, Paganism would have created less damage, had they taken the place of Christianity with their dogmas and types of faith, since they are religions, something that Lutheranism is not”<sup>22</sup>. In this paragraph De Maistre admits to a relative concept of dogma. A dogma is a dogma when it is necessary for power. One can no longer discern whether the object of faith is the Catholic God or the power He legitimates.

A similar concept of power reveals a penchant towards Nihilism one would not, at first glance, associate with a champion of militant Catholicism. The insight that the character of sovereignty is arbitrary in the end (together with the awareness that man’s efforts to found sovereignty on anything other than on force amounted to nought) seems to justify the interpretation of those who, like Carl Schmitt, saw a “decisionist” in Joseph de Maistre, a supporter of the irrational roots of political authority and its decisions.

Of all misfortunes, Nihilism is surely the worst. In foreign politics it stands for “politics of power”. The spreading of this principle was, in fact, one of the main causes of the first world war.

It is not by chance that H. Kissinger in his last essay *The art of Diplomacy* concludes that “Bismarck asserted that power supplied its own legitimacy<sup>23</sup>” and that “driven by such convictions, Bismarck proclaimed the relativity of *all* belief, including even the belief in the permanence of his own country”<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> E. M. Cioran, *Esercizi di Ammirazione*, Adelphi, Milano, 1988, p. 57

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61

<sup>23</sup> H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Touchstone, New York, 1994, p. 124

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 127

The germ of Nihilism infected all world views, radicalizing and dehumanizing them. Such views soon came to show their most tragic, dramatically violent aspects. Fanaticism is a Nihilist contamination of the original doctrine, in which humanity loses all significance and intolerance knows no limit.

Nihilism also proved to be the extreme and final abandon of “natural law”, “the enemy is no longer seen as a human being; he lies outside the law<sup>25</sup>”. Nihilism shifted values in such a way that everything was dehumanized. As the last weapon of an “aristocratic elite” threatened by the masses, after feeding (itself) on the pain of the material battles of the First World War, it found its natural development in Totalitarianism. In this form one can see the total loss of equity, that yardstick that manages to model itself according to the form of the objects it is to measure. It is therefore not the utopia in itself, as many argue, that caused the tragedies of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the fact that it had become contaminated with Nihilism. In Nihilism ideologies degenerate into their opposites and this happens because each doctrine contains infinite germs of disaster.

Even the myth of individual emancipation is not immune to contagion. The theories of “productivity of low wages” and “Social Darwinism” are clear examples of the dehumanization of society and the loss of that certain sense of equity that is at the root of any type of humanism.

Nihilism is “truth becomes king, according to which all the purposes of being given until now come to fall”<sup>26</sup>. This enabled values within ideologies to be *shifted*, exalting their rhetoric dimension on one hand, but, on the other nullifying their essence of which only a feeble semblance remains. Being is voided of any purpose. What remains is only the “quest for power”, that is implicit in its existence, a power that requires *super-empowerment*. In fact “as soon as power remains still, at a certain degree of power, it turns into impotence”<sup>27</sup>. Heidegger writes:

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<sup>25</sup> E. Jünger and M. Heidegger, *Oltre la Linea*, Adelphi, Milano, 1989, p. 67

<sup>26</sup> M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Adelphi, Milano, 1994, p. 566

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 566

[...] power itself, and power *alone* sets the values, keeps them alive and decides on its own with regard to the possible justification of a position based on values. If the whole entity is will power, then what “has” and “is” a value is only that which fully realizes the power of its essence. But power is power only as the empowerment of power.<sup>28</sup>

The barbarism of Totalitarianisms is no longer inconceivable when seen as power that constantly searches for its empowerment: “the last purpose of Totalitarianism - writes Hanna Arendt - is the total domination of man. Concentration camps are laboratories in which experiments of total domination are conducted. Human nature being what it is, this goal cannot be achieved except in the extreme conditions of a hell built by man”<sup>29</sup>.

### ***Postmodern Pragmatism***

The war against Totalitarianism was the fight against Nihilism. The war was won, but only in a wider sense. Heidegger in fact notes: “showing Nihilism the door is of no use, because for some time now it has been invisibly roaming around the house”<sup>30</sup>. Healing “can only refer to the fatal consequences of the planetary process or to the menacing phenomena that accompany it”<sup>31</sup>. Man did not rid himself of Nihilism, he only learned to live with it.

One might ask how we survived such a cataclism? We cannot help being aware that the Europe of the Thirties was a lost continent. It was from the Anglo-Saxon culture that the answer to Nihilism sprang forth, or at least in this culture, resistance was organized. Dewey’s *instrumentalism* and Keynes’ “*welfare liberalism*” played a crucial role. These authors were capable of *finding a way to softly terminate the terrible crisis in which the European society found itself entangled*.

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 569

<sup>29</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo sacer*, Einaudi, Torino, 1995, p. 132

<sup>30</sup> E. Jünger and M. Heidegger, *Oltre la Linea*, Adelphi, Milano, 1989, p. 112

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113

Dewey's reflection started from a positive concept of liberty. Liberty did not mean only freedom from coercion and external conditioning imposed upon an individual, but it was also positive liberty geared towards achieving the individual's own potential: the moral purpose of the individual is therefore to carry out his function, which consists of an activity in which his will and his potential are achieved.

If liberty is positive liberty, society should not limit itself to guaranteeing negative liberty, but allow its members to develop their own liberties. As an "instrumental" tool, the content of liberty must not be predetermined. The purpose here is to achieve social purposes through individuals' efforts. The success of democracy is due to the better distribution of knowledge rather than to the redistribution of wealth. There is no desire to change human nature in doing this. The aim is simply to guarantee potential access to the common cognitive resources from which the individual can then liberally build its own achievements.

Dewey was convinced that he could exile theology without having to forgo ethics. This operation was inevitable if the consequences of Nihilism were to be mitigated, in the hopes of being able to control it. On these grounds Dewey concluded that human beings' adaptive nature is the foundation of democratic power.

Ethic action can be naturalistically explained without having to provide a finalist explanation of universal order. Nature does not have an intrinsic ethic value but, in the course of its evolution, in and with mankind it has acquired an ethical dimension. Ethics are therefore the fruit of man's adaptation to his environment. Knowledge itself is adaptive; it is an interactive process between the individual and the external environment where problematic realities are reconstructed and reviewed. "Truth" becomes a means to satisfactorily solve problematic situations.

Contrary to the empirists, Dewey does not conceive experience as a bundle of sensations. Experience is not the registration of events, nor does it have exclusively cognitive qualities. Sensations, registrations, and knowledge are all part of a much wider whole, that is, of the relationship with nature.

Reflective situations have an instrumental character: they are means to better adapt to nature. Sometimes man and nature can establish a perfect balance, harmonious unity and perfect integration. But this balance is always precarious. The world is a scenario of risks; it is full of dangers.

What follows is that not all societies are capable of exploiting their own growth potential. Democracy finds its own legitimacy in the better ability to adapt. It can exploit the creative potential of its citizens, guaranteeing the distribution, albeit neither optimal nor adequate, of cognitive resources.

Values therefore have a historical, not an absolute legitimacy. Each ethic system is related to the environment in which it formed and for which it was functional: values are typically human actions; they are plans of action. Democracy is that way of life in which all mature persons take part in the process of forming the values that regulate the life of associates; and this way of life is necessary from the point of view of social good as well as from that of the full development of human beings as individuals.

According to utilitarian and atomistic ethics, the object of desire is pleasure (or lack of pain). For Dewey the object of desire is not pleasure but the purpose one wishes to achieve. We feel pleasure when our goal has been achieved. Arguing that everyone wants to find happiness does not mean arguing that everyone wants to feel pleasure. It simply means that all men want to satisfy their desires. Desires can change, since the agents are not all equal.

An ethics standard with which to distinguish among good and bad has not yet been found. In order to find it Dewey calls on the functionalist psychology of the end of the 1800s for which pleasure was the realization of the capabilities of an agent. Happiness is the agreement, prior or following, among the objective circumstances brought about by our behaviours and our desires and purposes. According to this view, the ethics standard allows us to distinguish between real and fake happiness: "We can distinguish between the false and unsatisfactory happiness found in the expression of a more or less isolated and superficial tendency of the self, and the true or



genuine good found in the adequate fulfillment of a fundamental and fully related capacity”<sup>32</sup>.

The Self reaches (true) happiness only in pursuing objectives that can be included in a co-operative universe. Dewey comes to the conclusion that social good and the well-being of all those on which the action acts, is the only good that meets the question of the Self with a purpose that is comprehensive and in expansion. The human ego is intrinsically social, linked to other “Selves” by instinctive social affections and such sympathetic affections make others’ good the object of desire and behavior. “Hence we cannot separate the idea of ourselves and our own good from our idea of others and of their good”<sup>33</sup>.

Society is the reference point for individual action, but the latter, in democracies is free because it is adaptive.

The aristocratic idea implies that the mass of men are to be inserted by wisdom, or, if necessary, thrust by force, into their proper positions in the social organism. It is true, indeed, that when an individual has found that place in society for which he is the best fit and is exercising the function proper to that place, he has obtained his completest development, but it is also true (and this is the truth omitted by aristocracy, emphasized by democracy) that he must find this place and assume this work in the main for himself.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear how Dewey assimilated Aristotelic tradition in a biological context. Biological reason takes the place of natural reason. Just as in Aristotle the supreme good achievable by man (happiness) consists in perfecting oneself as a human being, i.e. in that activity that differentiates man from all other things. But happiness is attainable only within the human community.

Dewey gave a first answer to Nihilism which, after the First World War, led the European continent to its downfall:

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<sup>32</sup> R. B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991, p. 157

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42

When interest in power is permeated with an affectionate impulse it is protected from being a tendency to dominate and tyrannize; it becomes an interest in effectiveness of regard for common ends.<sup>35</sup>

His thought can be placed in an intermediate position between the individualistic liberalism of old and socialism. It helped determine that turn in American politics called the “New Deal”, an adaptive project that took its form and consensus from the failure of the American *Laissez-faire* of the Twenties.

With Dewey, the human project lost its utopic dimension to become necessary adaptation and, therefore, a constant search for improvement. Dewey was decidedly against utopian philosophers, aware as he was that utopia normally generates skepticism and fanaticism, both closely related to Nihilism. Adapting means setting concrete goals, aiming not for remote destinations but for those closer at hand, achievable in the actual historical conditions.

Keynes himself seems to take inspiration from *adaptive reason* when he asks the State to intervene directly in the economy. This is deemed necessary in order to recreate a social balance, where society is threatened by an unemployment rate as high as never before. State intervention does not aim to implement a “plan for history”, but is relative to historical and social circumstances:

It is certain that the world will not much longer tolerate the unemployment which, apart from brief intervals of excitement, is associated - and, in my opinion, inevitably associated - with present day-day capitalistic individualism.<sup>36</sup>

Keynes, in “The end of Laissez-Faire”, concludes that “our problem is to work out a social organisation which shall be as efficient as possible without offending our notions of a satisfactory way of life”<sup>37</sup>. He denies the ex-

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158

<sup>36</sup> J. M. Keynes, *The General Theory of employment, Interests and Money*, Mc Millan, London, 1936, p. 381

<sup>37</sup> J. M. Keynes, *The end of Laissez-Faire*, in *The collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, vol. IX, *Essays in Persuasion*, Mac Millan, London, 1972, p.294

istence of a pact or contract conferring perpetual rights to those who own or purchase goods and the existence of “natural liberty” for individuals’ economic activities.

This does not mean that Keynes was against individual liberty; if anything he recognized its instrumental and non-aprioristic character:

But, above all, individualism, if it can be purged of its defects and its abuses, is the best safeguard of personal liberty in the sense that, compared with any other system, it greatly widens the field for the exercise of personal choice. It is also the best safeguard of the variety of life, which emerges precisely from this extended field of personal choice, and the loss of which is the greatest of all the losses of the homogeneous or totalitarian state. For this variety preserves the traditions which embody the most secure and successful choices of former generations; it colours the present with the diversification of its fancy; and, being the handmaid of experiment as well as of tradition and of fancy, it is the most powerful instrument to better the future.<sup>38</sup>

The expansion of governmental functions was for Keynes “the only practicable means of avoiding the destruction of existing economic forms”<sup>39</sup>. Keynes' argumentation theses do not differ too much from those of Dewey. Adaptation becomes “to work out a social organisation which shall be as efficient as possible”. This should guarantee, or better, exalt the individual, “the most powerful instrument”, when sided by government intervention.

There is, however, a typically English note of sarcasm: “To suggest social action for the public good to the City of London is like discussing the Origin of Species with a bishop sixty years ago”<sup>40</sup>.

### ***Europe, today***

Our excursus draws to a close. It was a circular route in which man returned to nature, a nature that was no longer static, but in movement, dynamic; where human work is the last stage of the evolution that acquires

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<sup>38</sup> J. M. Keynes, *The General Theory*, p. 380

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> J. M. Keynes, *The end of Laissez-Faire*, p. 287

its own autonomous meaning with man. The views presented are still alive in consciences today; all - some more, some less - influence the identity of European citizens who freely recognize themselves in them. These views are ideal types, and each individual vision of reality is contaminated by them. Each one of us can, for “play”, try to recognize himself in one of the visions presented in the framework of this historical-philosophical reconstruction. There is only one vision I feel inclined to explicitly condemn: the “vision of nothing”, which, due to the power delirium it bears, is not to be confused with an agnostic and skeptic essay.

Believing in the existence of *one* European identity means wanting to impose it. The “European something” thus proves to be - how could it be otherwise? - pluralism. Europe’s citizens will make their choices for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The amateur can only appeal to the sense of equity, “a form of justice that goes beyond what has been written down as law”<sup>41</sup>, the only protection against every kind of dehumanization of the most humane of all ideologies. “Not of today or yesterday they are, but lives eternal: no one can date its birth.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotele, *Retorica*, Mondadori, Milano, 1996, p. 111

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p.117

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