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The Political Economy of Europe's Future and Identity

Integration in crisis mode

Edited by
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Noi si mura

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Il Ratto di Europa

by Onofrio Pepe, maestro scultore e mitografo, Florence (EUI collection)

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CHAPTER 2

On the soul and roots of European integration: purpose and metaphors

Alexandre Palma

1. Introduction

Historical realities need a purpose. When this is missing, they tend to lack the inner energies to face adversities and the creativity to engage with new challenges. The contemporary process of European construction shows precisely that. Not that there weren't always goals to be reached by this coming together of European nations. The consolidation of peace in post-war Europe and the establishment of social and economic conditions for that peace to endure were precisely a major goal that gave it, in the beginning of European integration, a clear sense of purpose. The question, though, has been, also since its beginning, if these goals were and/or are strong enough for this European project to keep making sense and, in consequence, to commit with it the European citizens. It is natural that, with time, some of these goals lose their mobilizing force. That happens too when the European project is a victim of its own successes. By overcoming some of the challenges that, for some time, gave it a certain sense of purpose, a void of meaning might be felt afterward. This has given rise to the idea that Europe needs a deeper

purpose, not so closely associated with short or medium-term institutional and economic goals. It has been argued instead that this bigger purpose ought to be derived from Europe's cultural identity.

The debate about a purpose and identity increases as the perception that the European project is going through a crisis sets in. The grounds for this perception cannot be denied, but they should, however, be contextualized. Maybe Europe had always been in crisis. That is, at the least, the view of thinkers such as George Steiner (2004) or Eduardo Lourenço (2001). To them, this crisis mode is not just an accident of Europe's current history or a consequence of the ineffectiveness of its political institutions. It is, instead, a decisive element of its own identity. Perhaps it is not by chance that the Greek myth talked about Europe (a Greek-Phoenician princess) as being abducted by Zeus, the king of all gods, illustrated by the sculpture on the first page of this volume. It is known how myths try to explain the current situation by etiologically projecting it into a time before time. The mythological stealing of Europe is then a powerful symbolic metaphor for its permanent state of crisis. In that case, Europe should learn to live in this crisis mode that determines so much of its identity, rather than trying just to overcome it. In a nutshell, 'crisis mode' is an inalienable element of the European identity, and (at least to a certain degree) the key to its historical vitality and to its cultural creativity.

This quest for purpose has also been a quest for a narrative identity for Europe (Ricoeur, 1988).[1] The linguistic elements of this are not just instrumental.[2] Perhaps the analysis of the contemporary debates about Europe is too often focused on its dogmatic identity (what Europe is) and on its historic identity (how Europe came to be). Never disregarding that, attention should be given as well to the way Europe talks about itself. While doing so, European culture actively shows and reconstructs its own identity. This is the backdrop for its current quest for purpose. That is the reason why some of its linguistic elements, such as the metaphors being used, are significant for an analysis of the current situation of the European project.

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1 Former EU Commission President José Manuel Durão Barroso (2013a) engaged also with the quest for a "new narrative for Europe": "But why, some may ask, a new narrative for Europe and why culture? [...] A new narrative for Europe not because we don't remain loyal to the *raison d'être* of the European community and the European Union; of course this remains valid. But because I think we need, in the beginning of the XXI century, namely for the new generation that is not so much identified with this narrative of Europe, to continue to tell the story of Europe. Like a book: it cannot only stay in the first pages, even if the first pages were extremely beautiful. We have to continue our narrative, continue to write the book of the present and of the future. This is why we need a new narrative for Europe".

2 I am applying to this subject the well-known principle set by Marshall McLuhan (1994: 7-21): 'The medium is the message'.

2. A body in search of its soul

A first great metaphor being used to talk about European identity and purpose comes from the anthropological realm: body and soul. A critical analysis of the current state of European political institutions underlies its use: these institutions are (or became) like bodies without souls. Taking into consideration the current sense of crisis among Europeans, one might think this is a relatively recent element in public discourse. But that is not the case. Quite the opposite, this metaphor was already being used early on. We can trace its use as far back as Robert Schuman. It was he who once stated that the European project "needs a soul (*il lui faut une âme*)".[3] More common among the European Union's 'founding fathers' was to establish a relationship between their own spiritual path and their public engagement with the European agenda. For instance, in a letter sent to Italian prime-minister Alcide de Gasperi, German chancellor Konrad Adenauer acknowledged: "We both faced our problems from the same spiritual base. We both started our political careers in a party that was both Democratic and Christian and we made sure that was clear in our actions".[4] Although there is here no explicit reference to the metaphor body-soul, the concern remains the same: the quest for a solid base for the European political project. This issue was in the mind of Europe's 'founding fathers' right from the start. On top of this inference, statements like this allow us to realize what these European politicians understood to be the 'soul of Europe'. To a higher degree than perhaps happens today, they associated it with a spiritual dimension, and even with a religious (Christian) reference. In doing so, they too were faced with some form of criticism, to which De Gasperi (2004: p. 185) answered in a quite unexpected way:

> "Recently, some have accused us and other European supporters of establishing, in the shadows, a kind of identity between Europe and Christianity or, more than that, between Europe and Catholic Christianity. Before being unfounded, this accusation is nonsensical. Allow me, however, to remember that Christianity, being a divine thing in our eyes, belongs to and is addressed to all men. To make it just a European thing would be to limit it and to degrade it".

Other layers of meaning can be found in the European appeal to the metaphor of body and soul. Besides this spiritual and/or religious element, the soul has also

3 Robert Schuman, quoted in de Gasperi (2004: p. 11).

4 Konrad Adenauer, quoted in De Gasperi (2004: p. 17).

been associated with an existential and institutional élan. That is precisely what a soul does to a body: it gives it life, motion, and reason.[5] The term 'soul' was explicitly used by another major figure within the European movement: Jacques Delors. Taking inspiration from Schuman (whom he quotes), Delors strongly associated the need for a purpose with the image of a soul: "It is necessary to give Europe a soul. [...] If in the next ten years, we are not able to give Europe a soul, spirituality, a meaning, we will have lost the game".[6] This dramatic prediction (from 1992) has been intensely quoted ever since and made Delors the great promoter of this metaphor. Three years before, though, he had already used this anthropological analogy, clearly diagnosing the need "to give more flesh (*plus de chair*) to this community and, why not, [also] a supplement of soul (*un supplémentd'âme*)".[7] In 2011, Delors would still come back to this issue, presenting it as a need for a "spiritual élan", without which "nothing great and lasting can ever be accomplished".[8] His successor, Jacques Santer, also engaged with this metaphor. He introduced, perhaps, a complementary view on it. The anthropological unity of body and soul implies that both need each other. If it is true that the European institutional body needs a soul, it is also true that the European soul is in need of an effective historical and political body. Santer promoted this complementary approach to the metaphor body-soul, namely by declaring that: "To give Europe a soul, it is not enough to recall the principles of European construction, which are reconciliation, peace, solidarity, justice, freedom or human dignity. It is still necessary to apply these principles".[9] The strength of the European soul is, therefore, also dependent on the effectiveness of its institutional body. Just as there is no living body without a soul, there's also no historical soul without a body.

Religious leaders also dealt with this metaphor, seeing in it an open door to their participation in the debates about European identity and, more important still, to critically address the secularization of European societies. They found in this element of the European authorities' discourse a bridge to something they were already arguing: a society that despises its spiritual element does not authentically promote the good of its citizens; Europe has the Judeo-Christian culture imbedded in its very identity, ignoring or renouncing it would lead Europe to

5 Triadic structure somehow related with the classic Aristotelian view on the soul.

6 Jacques Delors, quoted in Daloz (1999: p. 215).

7 Delors (1989).

8 Delors (2012).

9 Jacques Santer, quoted in Daloz (1999: p. 215).

failure or to the emergence of something that would no longer be Europe. This was also a reaction to a decrease in political influence by these communities, a consequence of the mentioned secularization of European societies. Pope John Paul II, a great European from the twentieth century and a religious leader with an acute understanding of his political role, was one of these leaders who appealed frequently to the 'soul' of Europe and did so in the context of the ecclesial project of a "new evangelization" for Europe. In his words (Pope John Paul II, 1991: p. 176):

> "Even today, the soul of Europe remains one, because, in addition to its common origins, it lives on common Christian and human values, such as the dignity of the human person, a profound sense of justice and freedom, work, a spirit of initiative, love for the family, respect for life, tolerance, the desire for cooperation and peace".

He makes here some controversial assumptions. Firstly, the soul of Europe is fundamentally one, something that seems to be challenged by numerous expressions of cultural diversities in it. Secondly, this unity derives from its common origins and from a common Christian background. If these claims by John Paul II cannot be discarded, because there are elements of truth in them, they should at the least be balanced with the acknowledgment of traces of diversity in its past history and in its current situation. The fact is that the metaphor 'body-soul' is here reinterpreted, giving it a stronger religious meaning. According to Teixeira (2004: p. 40), to Pope John Paul II, "Europe is incomprehensible without Christianity; the Church, is linked to everything that makes the glory of Europe; she is the soul of Europe". In this perspective, 'soul of Europe' does not only mean a general sense of purpose or a vitality needed by an institutional and political body. It goes deeper than that, almost being identified with Europe's religious and spiritual traditions. These are seen as key means to overcome divisions and to consolidate the European social and political processes. Therefore, according to him, "it is urgent to return to the common sources of that faith and to the same set of values that constitute [Europe's] most precious heritage" (Pope John Paul II, 1991: p. 483). This axiological or ethical dimension of Europe's soul is a recurring element in the way several religious leaders use this metaphor. That is confirmed by the way Pope Benedict XVI also took part in this discussion, clearly coupling the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Europe's quest for its soul: "In order to create new and lasting unity [in Europe], political, economic and juridical instruments are important, but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal" (Pope Benedict XVII, 2008). He too had diagnosed, before the Italian Senate (on May

13, 2004), an inner 'void' in contemporary Europe, taking even further this anthropological metaphor of body and soul: "At this time, when Europe seems to have reached the pinnacle of success, it seems like it has become empty within, paralyzed by a crisis of its circulatory system, paralyzed by a crisis threatening its very survival, which is entrusted to transplants that cannot help but alter its identity" (Ratzinger, 2005b: pp. 24-25). In either case, the metaphor of body and soul is assumed as a means to "awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal", decisive elements of Europe's contemporary "search for its own identity" (Pope Benedict XVII, 2008).

3. A project in search of its roots

Another relevant metaphor used to talk about the current European challenges, and therefore about a greater purpose of the political integration project, is taken from the organic realm. It focuses on the "roots" of European culture. This second metaphor is used, though, in a slightly different context, not so much to talk about the vitality of the current European political project but much more to raise the question of Europe's identity. The debate about European identity grew as European societies underwent significant transformations. A shift in mentalities introduced by post-War generations, with a major impact on its axiological views and life practices, social and economic globalization, that changed the role of Europe in international relations and promoted a non-Eurocentric view on the World, a decrease in birth rates and migratory fluxes, with the inevitable diversification of cultures in European soil, are amongst some of the facts that describe how Europe is changing. It is against this backdrop of change that the interest in finding and/or defending European identity has grown. It is within it that the appeal to the European "roots" has gained traction.

There seems to be a second difference in the use of this metaphor. While 'body and soul' is used in a reasonably balanced way both by political and religious actors, the appeal to the European 'roots' seems to be more frequent in the public discourse of religious leaders. Not that some traces of it cannot be found in statements of public office holders or even of renowned scholars. Former European Commission President José Manuel Durão Barroso, for example, talked about a European "aspiration for unity", which he saw "at the very root of European culture" (Barroso, 2013b), and Francis Fukuyama (2018: pp. 85-86), when dealing with the political impact of a worldwide quest for identity, describes contempo-

rary Europe as being "largely secular societies with Christian roots".[10]

This metaphor seems further used and developed by religious leaders. Such is the case, once again, of John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI). Firstly, this catholic leadership, here taken just as an illustration of this metaphor use, interprets the 'European roots' as its 'spiritual roots', as can be seen in the following quote (Pope John Paul II, 2003: 7):

> "I would like to mention in a particular way the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage, accompanied by a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without *spiritual roots* and somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history".

This diagnosis is very much in line with the observations that also contextualized the appeal to the 'European soul'. The highlighting of this spiritual element almost unites these two metaphors. They become almost two different means that stress the same idea. Due to that, there is no wonder if, with regard to the 'European roots', we can also find prophetic statements claiming about the 'roots' what is said about the need for a 'soul' or an 'élan'. For example, in programmatic pronouncements such as these: "The new Europe needs to rediscover its ultimate roots"; "Europe, as you stand at the beginning of the third millennium, *open the doors to Christ! Be yourself. Rediscover your origins. Relive your roots"* (Pope John Paul II, 2003: 21). Here too, one can see how the spiritual understanding of the 'European roots', in these religious actors' mind, leads to a Christian interpretation of this metaphor.

Secondly, this metaphor is also interpreted in cultural terms. This second element is not so relevant when talking about the 'European soul' as it is when talking about its 'roots'. 'Roots' become a reference to European history, to its heritage, which is deeply dependent on the religious and/or Christian contributions to it. These catholic European leaders never ceased to bring it into public debate:

> "Multiple are the cultural roots that have contributed to reinforce the values just mentioned: from the spirit of Greece to that of Roman law and virtue; from the contributions of the Latin, Celtic, German-

10 It is interesting to take notice of how Fukuyama too grounds his critical analysis of the current claim for identity on the "soul", namely on *thymos* that Ancient Greeks considered a part of it.

> ic, Slav and Hungarian-Finnish peoples, to those of the Jewish culture and the Islamic world. These different factors found in the Jewish-Christian tradition the power that harmonized, consolidated and promoted them. By acknowledging this historical fact in the process leading to a new institutional order, Europe cannot deny its Christian heritage, since a great part of its achievements in the fields of law, art, literature and philosophy have been influenced by the evangelical message. Not giving in to a temptation to be nostalgic or to be content mechanically to repeat past models, but being open to the new challenges emerging, Europe will need to draw inspiration with creative fidelity from the *Christian roots* that have defined European history" (Pope John Paul II, 2002: 4).

The immediate context of this pronouncement is of utter importance because it helps understand not only the meaning given to the metaphor 'European roots' but also to understand why this theme became so important for some religious actors. In the aftermath of the Laeken European Council (2001), the European Convention started the discussion and drafting of a European Constitution. The question if Christianity should have been mentioned in its preamble pushed these ecclesial leaders to take part in this discussion. Reacting against those who refused any explicit reference to Christianity in this essential document for the future of European institutions, they argued passionately in favour of the acknowledgment of the religious and Christian roots of Europe. On the one hand, John Paul II recognized a plurality in the European roots. A meeting of peoples and cultures helped create Europe as we know it. But, on the other hand, according to him, it was the 'Jewish-Christian tradition' that allowed for an integration of such diverse elements, in order to generate what has become Europe and the European culture. Therefore, even if the European roots are culturally diverse, Jewish-Christian culture historically plays in it an absolutely unique role or, in other words, it is a more decisive element of European identity than all those other cultural contributions.

J. Ratzinger (2005a: p. 352) echoed this same view. For him it was clear that Europe was going through a "stress test", a crisis mode that could be described with this organic metaphor: "A tree without roots withers". This test resulted from the contemporary clash of two European sub-cultures, one in which the Human being sees himself as a product of his own making and the other in which all things are viewed as gifts from a divine Creator (Ratzinger, 2005a: pp. 345-346). This was also a stand taken by him in the context of the debate about the

European Constitution.[11] As a matter of fact, in his view the resistances to any explicit reference to Christianity in the document were not grounded on respect towards other religious communities, but on a rationalist perspective that denies all forms of openness to transcendence. He tried, above all, to demonstrate how those ancient roots are not dead and are still needed for the future. This was a way to deal with the suspicion that his claim was essentially nostalgic of a Europe that no longer exists, one in which all the continent was Christian and that saw life through Christian eyes. To him, any "historical observation also implies something about the present, since to mention roots is also to point to residual sources of moral guidance, and so to something that constitutes the identity of this thing called Europe" (Ratzinger, 2005a: p. 348). Roots mean, therefore, the present relevance of European history, of its legacy and heritage, so deeply influenced by Christianity. In fact, as Ratzinger (2005a: p. 353) put it, "we need roots to survive".

4. Some concluding remarks

In the use of this metaphor, something seems to be missing though: the fruits of Europe. This would be a logical counterpart to 'roots' within this organic analogy. Perhaps a more detailed analysis of these debates might come to the conclusion that what might be considered the fruits of Europe is already being contemplated, even if the word is not being used. Anyway, this absence is meaningful. By 'fruits' I mean the current concrete manifestations or effects of the European culture(s). The European identity is not something to be found only in previous ages. It is also something that is dynamically showing and transforming itself today. In consequence, this European quest for itself supposes looking not only at its own foundations, as important as they are, but also at its contemporary realizations. This would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of these fundamental aspects of the European culture, assuming that cultural identity is not just some-

11 "Let us take a closer look at this contrast between the two cultures that have marked Europe. This contrast has surfaced in two controverted points of the debate about the Preamble to the European Constitution: shall the Constitution mention God? Shall it mention Europe's Christian roots? Some say that there is no need to worry, since article 52 of the Constitution guarantees the institutional rights of the Church. However, this means that the Churches find room in European life only in the realm of political compromise, but that when it comes to the foundations of Europe, their actual substance has no room to play any formative role. The arguments given for this clear "No" are superficial, and it is clear that, rather than indicating the real reason, they in fact cover it. The claim that mentioning Europe's Christian roots would offend the feelings of the many non-Christians who live in Europe is unconvincing, since what we are dealing with is first and foremost a historical fact that no one can seriously deny": Ratzinger (2005a: pp. 348).

thing to be found in the past (in its roots) but also something lively showing its strength and capacity to adapt and answer to new situations today. It would as well allow for a more dynamic narrative framework for the European culture, enriching the debate and, in consequence, the thought about these issues. It would, ultimately, help understand how religious and/or Christian elements are still decisive to European identity. These fruits might no longer be immediately perceived as being religiously and/or Christianly inspired, but perhaps they are. Religion, especially in secularized societies, tends not so much to disappear (as at first glance it might appear) but rather to take new forms and manifestations.[12] This means that there are several 'religious and/or Christian fruits' that just are not being perceived as that. If so, then all the talk about the religious and/or Christian roots of European culture(s) would no longer be under the suspicion of being nostalgic or anachronistic. At the same time, this would help religious communities overcome a defensive attitude towards some of the social and political developments in contemporary Europe.

The two great metaphors here highlighted confirm at least two things: Europe is in an intense quest for itself; and Europe has at its disposal a rich linguistic set of tools. Both put into words the current form of the European recurrent 'crisis mode'. They show not only what is happening today, but also show that, like in its past, it is through crises that Europe has always found its way. The former witnesses its recurrent sense of crisis and demand for purpose. The latter shows its cultural richness and intellectual vitality. But these two are intertwined. There is no purpose to be found outside the way we express it. Purpose has to have some logic, that is, some *logos* (word). There are no metaphors disconnected from reality. Metaphors use what there is and is known to us to express or explain something else. The two metaphors considered here – 'body - soul' and 'roots (- fruits)' – show also that Europe acknowledges the need for non-materialistic goals and strives to know what they might be. There is no reason not to see its religious and spiritual heritage as an asset in this European enterprise.

12 This raises another interesting question: Is it possible to keep producing these fruits (religious and/or Christian) disconnected from their roots? Is there not a risk of, after some time, losing that capacity?

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