

## Is there a *European* soul?

Vital questions upon the presence or the absence of a common European culture.

### Definitions

**Europe:** We do not mean the continent, because a continent is just a *geographic area*. Even the *European Union* is, at the moment, a simple political union. We do consider other countries not actually members of the Union, like Russia, as part of the *European family*. We also consider the USA, Canada, Argentina, Chili, even Australia and New Zealand, which, geographically speaking, are situated so far from the Continent, adhering to the same european values.

**Culture and Civilization:** Before talking about these values it is important to define culture as different to civilization. If civilization is the ensemble of the *technical knowledge* and *practices* of a country, culture consists of *principles, values* and *ideals*. European culture is defined by a unique concept of women and men living as free *individuals* in a context of social liberty and in a balanced space between the *public* and the *private*. These philosophical and political values found in *humanism*, the *enlightenment* and the *social contract* are all *cultural* values present in every country in the continent and even beyond Europe.

**Euroscptics:** They exist. They deny the idea of a common European nation. They insist that there is no *common language*. Euroscptics find the idea of European *citizenship* absurd and without meaning. They see French, German, Spanish or British etc as local, national citizens instead, not belonging to this artificial (in their opinion) European nation. What they may miss is *common culture*.

**Possible answers:** To reveal this common culture it is important to understand how *European philosophy* places men and women in the centre of an *observable* world. It is also important to understand how *European art* transgresses reality for the pleasure of *recreating* it on a theatrical scene. It is necessary to point out how *European modernity* introduces political relativism which makes it possible for individuals coming from different origins and having different political opinions or different religious beliefs to coexist and live together. This is the essence of *democratic behavior*, the ground upon future European Union may finally be built as a *supranational* State.

**Who belongs to Europe and to who does Europe belong?** Everyone believing in the fundamental European values of *tolerance, equality* and political and social *freedom*. If this is true for every citizen in any European state, needless to say that these values apply also to citizens from all over the world living legally in Europe. They are all protected by the same political guaranties of freedom and enjoy the same individual rights in every State of the Union. Another fundamental European quality is that of understanding politics in terms of theatrical *representation*. This may be strange for those who are not fluent in what the European language has been since Ancient Greece, that is to say the *theatrical* language. Yet, this language is quite

natural to every European: see how everybody understands and speaks about events happening in the *political scene* all over Europe, from Lisbon to Moscow and from Oslo to Rome, to Athens and Limassol.

## Art

European art has also got a unique quality, not found elsewhere. Artists are not simple observers of life and the world which they live in. They propose their own vision instead, rivaling with Creator. A look at the works of painters like Nicolas Poussin, Garofalo, Caravaggio, Dali and Picasso may surprise us. These painters are not only changing our vision of the world by *recreating* it, they also become active part of it by putting themselves *inside* their creations, signing them with their own pictorial presence. Look at Caravaggio's paintings, with the painter present in many of them: in one as the mythical Goliath, in another as a young person, in many others as an unidentified (at first glance) figure, a hand opening a door or pointing to something invisible to us. The same is true with the renaissance painter Garofalo inserting a small portrait of himself as a reflected image on a mirror, in one of his most famous paintings *The Immaculate Conception*. And what about European literature and theater, with Shakespeare creating a second play *inside* the main play, a kind of a theatrical intrigue put *on stage* by the protagonist himself, in order to unveil the real murderer of his father in *Hamlet*! From Sophocles and Euripides to Marlowe, to Molière and to Beckett *tragic irony* obliges the spectator to enter the spectacle and participate by understanding what is going to happen and feel fear and mercy for the hero who fights a superior adversary and finally falls. "Humans are intelligent animals in perpetual revolt" said once the famous anarchist Michel Bakunin. This is especially true of Europeans. The so many revolutions in Europe, and not only the political ones, bear evidence to it.

Time, another adversary which Europeans have tried to understand, explore and subdue from Heraclitus to Augustine, Einstein and Bergson, was and still is a profound inspiration in European art, especially in what we call *absolute* music (music referring to itself), in European literature and in this wonderful European invention, the *cinema*. From Marcel Proust who, in his famous romance *À la recherche du temps perdu*, describes the inner experience of the author traveling back in time, to Samuel Beckett who, in his play *Waiting for Godot* speaks about *nowhere* as a possible somewhere *out of time*, to *surrealistic poetry* with its transgression of logical meaning, there is a special, European way of *experiencing* life and this is exactly what we understand as the *common European language*, spoken in Italy and in France, in Germany, in Greece and in Spain, everywhere in Europe and even beyond its borders.

## Philosophy

From Socrates, the Greek, to French philosopher Derrida, without forgetting William of Ockham, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Nietzsche and many others, European philosophers develop what is known as philosophical skepticism using Reason as the tool. "Verum ipsum

factum” declared the Italian Gianbatista Vico, in other words *real is what can be constructed, made, verified*. This is called *methodological doubt*, a typical European attitude in general, not specifically Greek, Italian, German or English. Consider the following argument, attributed to Descartes. An evil demon has control of my experience and induces all my sensations, thoughts and perceptions, so leading me to believe that I inhabit an objective world. The demon’s deception is systematic: at no point does the experience that he produces deviate from the norm that is familiar to you and me. But the world in which I believe myself is fictitious; I am alone in the universe with the demon, who delights in deceiving me. How, in the face of this possibility, can I be sure that the world of my perception really exists and really is as I think it to be? This famous argument set European philosophy on its skeptical journey, not found in other cultures, but common in every European thinker. European philosophers examine the World in every aspect trying to find purpose, accepting hazardous creation, discovering the laws of evolution and then asking questions about meaning. Why-questions (a common European thinking procedure) arise in the context of rational discussion; rational discussion requires language; language is organized by the concept of truth; truth is a relation between thought and reality and reality is objective, neither created by our concepts, nor necessarily well described by them. Recently, analytical philosophy has turned to linguistics to understand how describing the world is actually *creating* it. And then comes a fundamental question about the gap between appearance and reality. All conceivable methods we have for crossing this gap, including science, fail to achieve their purpose. But Kant reassures us that the world is there and we are part of it. In brief this is the train of European thought, from french speaking Descartes to german speaking Immanuel Kant and from Greek sophists Parmenides, Democritus and Zeno to Socrates, Aristotle and Epictetus, coming finally to Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy and other contemporary thinkers. In medieval Europe philosophers tried through logic to conceive procedures that believing in God is not irrational. In the years of *humanism* and the *enlightenment* separating philosophy from theology led us to philosophical relativism. Talking of relativism we understand political emancipation. Accepting it we finally enter modern times’ democracy.

## **Politics**

The absence of any absolute philosophical truth and of any theological dogma means that modern European States are neutral, abstract systems guaranteeing political freedom and tolerance not only for their citizens, but also for everybody legally living in their domain. Although the monster of totalitarianism is also a european by-product, Europe has paid too high a price in blood and destruction to forget that indifference creates a political vacuum which then is fast occupied by the extremes. Political participation and tolerance are the only means to keep away the monster of totalitarianism. Modern democracy is not perfect, far from that. But it is a regime in which leaders can be changed freely by its citizens. This is essential, even more now as we experience a period of deep crises which have put the southern European States in the face of bankruptcy and the northern ones in front of a tough, Shakespearean-like dilemma: to help or not

to help? Europe must understand that the only way of surviving is to overcome inner differences and go for more unity, otherwise it will die. A dying Europe will create a terrible vacuum leaving the world without its fundamental values of political freedom and emancipation, human understanding and tolerance, social peace and prosperity.

Let me, please, propose a conclusion: if Europe is to survive, this will not be possible with each European country struggling separately. Smaller States will not be able to overcome the crisis, but this is also true of the bigger ones in this context of a very complex and fast changing world. Europe has already given a lot of lessons about humanity, equality and political freedom. It is now time to give itself the most important one: that of unity. No one can overcome the danger of an unstable Third World that explodes. Not every European State can handle separately the complexity of contemporary political and financial problems and this is true even of Germany. Europe must look back and see all these horrible wars, in fact European civil wars: from the Hundred Years War in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth, and from the first to the second World Wars in the previous century, not forgetting the Napoleonic Wars in the nineteenth and the so many religious conflicts, which too often devastated France, Germany, Italy, England and Spain, Europe has suffered a lot and should not go back to those terrible, dark years. Culture, instead, has always been and will always be Europe's strong point. This is the real European soul which gives meaning to our lives. Let us understand and finally accept it as our most profound quality, our common language, the one which must finally be spoken by our governments. Let us take important decisions as *Europeans* who bear in mind our common history and who finally see the necessity of a common future: the one belonging not only to us, but equally to the younger generations all over the world.

**Université de Strasbourg-ITIRI**

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**Nicholas Papadimitriou**