

THE MEDITERRANEAN COMMUNITY AND THE EU: THE ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The still too short life of the Mediterranean Forum of the European Community (EUROMED) has already proved that Europe is changing one of its earlier ways of matching political issues. This was the approach that consisted of considering itself just as a continental land and addressed its interests mostly towards the west-bound and the north-bound. It is possible to say, however, after the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the USSR and the start of a new world order dominated by just one nation - the US - that a fundamental change has taken place: Europe has 'rediscovered' its links with the East and the South, which is to say Asia and Africa.

A few brief historical considerations can be useful for a better understanding of my point. The ideal of a united Europe does not date back much in time. Before the 15th century the concept of Europe was basically a geographical one. The ancient Greeks and Romans were the first to imagine it. After the christianization of the Roman empire and its separation during the fourth century between a Pars Orientis and a Pars Occidentis, people living inside its borders started to think of themselves as being part of 'Christianity'. The separation of the Latin-speaking world from the Greek world distinguished Western Christianity from Eastern Christianity. After the 15th century, while the Greek and the Eastern churches stood inside the sphere of influence of dar-al Islam, the Western churches, guided by the Pope, were trying to engender a 'practical' unity, taking the shape of a federation.

One can think that, since the 9th century, the German-Roman empire after its birth was already moving in the same direction. This empire had a very strong authority and remained alive for an entire millennium, from the time of Charles the Great up to the the Peace of Pressburg (1806). In reality, however, after the 18th century this empire lost real political authority over Europe, with the exception of a few territories between Germany and northern Italy. Its moral prestige was kept alive, but nothing more than that.

During the 15th century the German-Roman empire, even if alive in name, was not able even to provide the basic necessities. Europeans had to stop the advance of the Ottoman Turks. Ottoman domination of the Balkans and a huge part of the Mediterranean Sea between the 15th and the 18th centuries had an incredible importance in the formation of Europe, and was one of the issues that pushed Europe to take charge of its identity. The identity that took shape recognized two main, original characters: the Greek-Roman tradition and the shared Christian faith. But this identity, whose internal cohesion was endangered by the fact that the European continent hosted people speaking different languages and having many cultural differences, was soon to be menaced by a new issue: the Protestant Reformation, which divided Western Christianity into two big parts. This religious crisis promoted in many ways the formation of nations where the laity took over religious lifestyles and values.

In our times Europe is soon going to include Turkey in its community, bringing this process to perfection, given the fact that for the very first time a state which is traditionally non-christian is going to be a part of the EU.

But let's get back to the 15th century. In 1460, under the direction of Pope Pius II, a Congress was held in Mantova. It brought together representatives of all the European states, with the intention of stopping the Ottoman advance inside Europe, and its takeover in the Mediterranean Sea. It was also the time when Europe stopped thinking about itself in terms of 'Christianity' and started to think of its identity more as 'Christian Europe'. The difference between the first and the latter can seem scarcely important to a non-European, but its importance is fundamental in the construction of Europe as we know it today.

After the French Revolution, and with the growth of nations in which laic values were dominant, it was even hard to recognize Europe as a collection of Christian nations. Even if Europeans could be Christians individually, their religion was not to be considered as a basic factor inside political and civil life. It was then necessary to consider and find other identities.

During the 19th century the ideals of the French Revolution and, at the same time, the shock generated across Europe by the Napoleonic wars, gave birth to a new concept: a European unity that would bring together all people and nations of the continent. The ideal of a European unity was also born against the background of the two main political realities that were dominating the continent in those days, the transnational empires on the one hand and the national states on the other. All the transnational empires - the Habsburg, the Czars of the Romanoff family, the Ottoman sultans - belonged to an Eastern-European or Asian-European dimension and gathered together people whose languages, cultural patterns and religious beliefs were all different.

Today this kind of experience can be easily felt as positive, but during the 19th century, liberal democracies and patriotism did not match well with multiculturalism. The very first scholars to think about a European community -- mainly inspired by Immanuel Kant's writings on the notion of 'perpetual peace' -- recognized in the transnational empires an obstacle to the coming of the ideals of nation and democracy to which they aspired.

In the 19th century some nations -- mainly France and Germany -- started to develop dangerous and aggressive politics. Of course, scholars who founded the ideals of a European unity were against the turning of patriotic values into this nationalistic aggressiveness. The First World War (1914-1918) ushered in the period known 'modernity', whose political aspects included the following developments:

1. the end of all the transnational empires
2. the domination of some nations over others
3. the development of a socialist state out of Russia and Central Asiatic states that were already Russian colonies
4. the political divisions in the Balkans
5. the crises of the Arab world, left without a guide after the end of the Ottoman Empire
6. the beginning of a process that led, around the middle of the century, to the birth of a Zionist state in Palestine
7. the beginning of the crisis for the colonial system around the world
8. the increasing political decadence of the European nations as world powers, and the growth in their place of the US.

The Second World War did not slow the development of these crises. Europe disappeared off the political map of the world, not only because it had not gained a transnational unity but because the US and the USSR had divided the world into two main areas of influence. Europe

was shared between western countries belonging to the NATO alliance and eastern countries belonging to the Warsaw Pact. It became common to call the first one the Free World and the latter the Socialist world.

At the beginning, the so called Free World intended European Unity mainly as economic and commercial (EEC). But it gradually changed into something different, tending towards a political unity.

From this perspective we can say that the death of the USSR did not help the political independence of the European community. There are few doubts that, up until 1989, western European countries enjoyed an independence that was hard to imagine in the eastern world. After 1989, however, Eastern European countries tried to lean on the West, which meant not only becoming part of the European Community but also reaching - both politically and socially - its standards of life. This engendered a phenomenon that seems to have prevailed until now: the difficulty that Europe has in becoming a strong federal state while at the same reducing the influence of the US, not much on Western Europe as on the Eastern European states.

The necessity of looking towards the south and the east, which I noted at the beginning of my brief article, arises from this point. Today's situation lead us not only to intensify our efforts to reach full federal unity but also to reassume our links -- strong until the 20th century -- with Europe's near continents: Asia and Africa. For the Mediterranean Sea this means returning it to its former status of 'center', a status that had declined during the last century, giving way to the growing importance of the oceans.

The Turkish engagement inside the European community is important to tighten the links among Europe, the Mediterranean Sea and the Near East. In this context we cannot forget that Turkey was for so many centuries the centerpiece in the relations between Europe and Asia.