

## EUROPE A Continent of the Past? \*

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**Abstract:** This reflection discusses the filiation of contemporary Europe in three possible matrices (mythological and political): the Greek matrix of philosophy and democracy, the Judeo-Christian roots and science. However, it seems none of them presents a consensual dimension while defining Europe. Thus, it should come as no surprise that today Europe lives a subtle nihilism and sort of masochist reflection. The essay also discusses the difficulty that the European reason lives as from Greek philosophy, by introducing a radical questioning that shakes the mythical truth, instituting an almost always problematic and even dramatic speech. This lack of internal coherence is also reflected in how the State and the Power were designed from the Judeo-Christian matrix. Realising today how much Europe has lost its centrality, the text ends as a word of exhortation to the recreation of Europeans and their identity.

**Keywords:** Europe, Mith, Philosophy, Identity, Science, Judeo-cristian matrix

The concept “Myths of Origin of European Nationalities” primarily requires us to reflect on Europe: the Europe to which we belong, the Europe that we are, the Europe which is culturally our place of birth, and the culture to which we subscribe. When I was asked to select a title for this reflection, I considered ‘Historical Myth, History and Myth’, but this turned out to be a Tunnel of Danaides. It is an inexhaustible and almost unwieldy subject, specifically in terms of the metaphysical or para-metaphysical considerations - such as Europe itself, Europe’s fate, Europe’s significance, the myth of Europe – which concern European history and culture.

History must, of course, make a concession in terms of generic order. History is never the primary instance, but rather the secondary instance. Before history, there is the ‘non-history’. This space, which constitutes the ‘non-history’, may therefore be regarded as the mythical discourse.

Nations, people and cultures are all unique. We are perhaps, on a journey towards a universal discourse, but at least, up to the present day, we have not yet reached that point – a universal discussion about us as a global population. In truth, all cultures and all people were originally part of something concrete which preceded History, and which was translated into diverse myths. All people and all cultures have at least some

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mythological traditions, even those who are regarded as having no History, such as the case of the Indians in Brazil, who were discovered by Caminha and other Portuguese.

These people appear to be without speech, as they are without any comprehension of the world which resembles the traditional European outlook to which we are accustomed - whatever it may be, but which is simultaneously mythical and historical, a vague entity which may be referred to, if nothing more. However, as Levi-Strauss demonstrated, these people who are regarded as primitive (we no longer dare to call anyone primitive, unless the Europeans themselves), did indeed have a comprehension of reality which corresponded to their context in the world, in which they did not have (nor could they have) any exterior consciousness of themselves, in terms of size or situation. Thus, these people had an extreme and absolute sense of interiority. On another level, based on the famous studies conducted by Levi-Strauss, it can be concluded that these people had a complex comprehension of what societies were like, which were themselves multifaceted.

As for Europe, it as a nymph, with regard to the way in which we are inextricably linked to mythology, whether or not we wish to be. The mythological debate regarding this nymph involves the Princess of Asia Minor, the father of the Gods, the great, eternal lover who pulled this princess from Asia Minor. Masked or disguised as a bull, he brought her across the sea which physically separates Asia from Europe. Symbolically, the way in which we describe the culture we inherited in Europe is as something which came to us from Asia, this Asia from whence everything came.

It comes as no surprise that, much later, Paul Valéry referred to Europe as the 'small cape of Asia'. Basically, this small cape of Asia is destined to be an exceptional place, a specific place, because this part of Asia - which is actually in Greece - could hold the key to deciding what constitutes the matrix of that which we call Europe, in terms of culture and debate regarding both Europe itself and the rest of the world. This would be the birthplace of something which is yet unnamed, as nothing similar exists in other cultures with which we are familiar - the phenomenon to which I refer is what we call Philosophy.

In the 19th Century, Renan referred to this, in a famous speech given at the Acropolis, regarding the Greek Miracle. However, shortly afterwards, in the same century, the Greek Miracle was re-interpreted, and this version is nowadays considered to be the more post-modern reading. Thus, Nietzsche's reading, which interpreted the Greek miracle differently to that of Renan, which purely and simply regards this Greek Miracle in the constitution of Reason, with regard to Reason itself, of reason as logos,

which describes and understands the world through a process of auto and hetero-intelligibility.

This, however, is not the analysis which Nietzsche would make of this same Europe, as apart from the sanctity of reason, there is something more obscure, which exists in an unconscious or, perhaps nocturnal regime. Europe is no longer seen as a continent which claims the primacy of reason and all the institutions that are in some form imbued with a demand for a rational understanding of the world.

Today, Europe can be viewed as having three origins. When the European Community recently wished to institutionalise a kind of European discussion for Europeans and for the wider world, they sought to identify Europe's roots. They began to regard the Greek influence as unavoidable. It was precisely there that Reason emerged as modality of discourse which rationalises the world, understanding that, apart from Reason, all other understandings belong to the realm of the irrational, of dreams or the unconscious. Another root is that of Judaism-Christianity, a pairing which is problematic in itself. And finally, the third root is of course, Science.

None of these European cultural dimensions were accepted as fundamental to the possible European identity. This appears to be a paradox, but is a reflection of the way in which European culture was gradually developing a masochistic reflex. It is a subtle kind of nihilism, which refuses to engage in any discourse which reflects what we consider to be the essence of European culture.

Thus, we can understand why the Greeks were refused. Interestingly, in the 19th century, European participation in traditional Greek culture was undoubted. Today, however, some Members of the European Parliament involved in this debate do not regard themselves as merely revising the famous Greek model of democracy, as this would imply that the proposal for the organisation of society originated with those with whom they say they disagree. Therefore, what we call democracy originated in the Greece of the renowned Pericles, Plato and Socrates – and was implemented in a society which also accepted slavery. Hence, Greek culture was rejected as the fundamental European identity.

With regard to Christian inspiration, in a Europe which is currently in the process of de-Christianisation – from a sociological perspective – it was met with great resistance and subsequently similarly rejected. Consequently, it was not considered feasible to maintain roots exclusively bound in Judaism.

And finally, Science. Apart from the fact that in the 16th century, there was probably no other Galileo in the world, we must not overlook the fact that by this time, there was already a great deal of knowledge which was even more developed: we need look no further than the great Civilisations of the East, such as China or India. But, in truth, the dominant Euro-centrism of the time did not allow this to be seen.

Science is in fact, that which no-one rejects, as Science is as we understand it, apart perhaps from an excessive anthro-europeanism, it has a universal value, which is so universal that it is not just of Europe, and in particular, it is not an exclusively European activity.

The way in which Europe appears content to exist as a continent either unwilling to have an identity, or one without a true identity, is probably due to these three factors. A refusal of the ideological-political is representative of the European spirit, as the most important and decisive factor was the invention of this creation which is without its own objective, unless that objective is the most abstract possible and at the same time the most precise, that which is Philosophy.

I refer to Philosophy as Ontology – that is to say, as Knowledge. I refer to the discussion of ‘Being’ which, in the reality of its abstraction, is that which we call ‘the Self’, which immediately invites an intellectual and spiritual attitude of radical inquiry.

This line of inquiry, apart from the fact that it does not immediately address the issues which will later arise, is nonetheless an autonomous inquiry which introduces a difference in what is the norm for all other contemporary cultures following the birth of Philosophy. This comprises the fact that all other cultures immediately develop a mythical-religious part in the matrix of value and truth, which is in itself a value which establishes the absolute divine.

We know that the Greeks had a similar concept of the divine, but this simply consisted of the organisation of their own cosmos. The divine both separates and orders the cosmos, thus creating its laws and organising the terrestrial sphere, empirical knowledge which is based on the behaviour and knowledge with which we associate the divine,

Thus, we have a discussion with regard to Greece and therefore the origins of Europe itself, which also comprises what we call our capacity of knowledge, which is introduced in European thought, from its very beginnings. This is a radical questioning of the sense of reality, which is not a given but which is also implicated in the question.

Interestingly, the second dimension of European heritage - that which we refer to as the Jewish-Christian root - introduces a new level of questioning to our comprehension of the world, from an Evangelical perspective. The concept was probably the distinguishing feature between Europe and all the other continents. For centuries, almost up to the present day, this concept separated Europe and Asia, as Christianity introduced an original idea of God, which was a somewhat radical contestation of God as power. Rather, God is not power. In their version of the Old Testament, God is omnipotent, but in the Evangelical version, God is spirit and subject, but is not considered a powerful political, social or ideological force. Furthermore, Europe was always a continent of interrogation and perplexity. Its history is the most active of all histories that we know of on other continents.

The History of Europe today is the inheritance of all that happened in the past. It remains an extremely problematic discussion, to the point of being dramatic. In truth, Europe constitutes a series of different nations which do not act as political players. It is a kind of virtual umbrella. Perhaps one day, Europe will be considered as one nation, but whilst Europe is but an idea, it is a permanently self-contested on all levels.

With regard to the historical-political order of Europe, apart from the Greek origin, it is also the place where the State was invented, such as conceived by the Romans. The first version of the History of Europe was the product of the Roman Empire itself. It is this myth, of the Roman Empire, which is a continuous myth as opposed to one resigned to the past. However, today, the myth of the Roman Empire is not as influential in Europe itself. Nowadays, the heirs who claim to be direct descendents of the Roman Empire are no longer the Roman-Germanic Empire, not Carlos the 5th, not Napoleon, neither is Hitler in its latest version, nor Stalin in another. Rather, the current heir of that history is the United States, regardless of the fact that this past took place in Europe, with its inherited mythology. Now Europe has been stripped of the opportunity to become the space of primary magnitude and importance in the historical-political order, for which it was a model. As it turns out, Europe already existed, and was previously a more consistent concept than it is today.

Europe and her people are always in a state of flux. One of the characteristics of European History is Europe's capacity for continuous renewal. In the Middle Ages, Europe was renewed due to the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. There was a second birth with the Portuguese discoveries. We were, in one sense, the agents of this second birth. The Portuguese discoveries (and later those of the Spanish, the French, the British etc.) in their promotion of exploring the New World established a different

Europe. Europe became the Old World, as a yet unknown world was discovered, one of which we knew nothing, and was yet without comprehension.

It was in this second Europe, after the discoveries that we Europeans began to develop an identity which we did not previously have, when we were nations with a certain consistency in our heritage, be it Greek, Latin etc., but our identity developed when we saw the wider world for the first time.

The New World which was born through the Discoveries also became involved in the continuity of the European world. This was the birthplace of imperialism which determined the occupation of Latin America on one side, and of Africa on the other (becoming a kind of farm for the Europeans). Europe was part of everything. Fernando Pessoa stated: I had been living in Durban as a European and I was never truly outside of Europe. Everything was Europe, although this constituted precisely the greatest illusion which Europeans hold. Europe itself undertook to reduce itself to what we today refer to as Europe.

However, today we are reduced to our own geographic boundaries, as known in Ancient times. Outside of this is non-Europe, which has not looked at the rest of the world as has Europe. All of a sudden, we were relative. Nowadays, Europe is a geographical space on the planet, alongside the others, which until recently did not have the same importance or almost mythical significance.

This could appear to be quite deceptive, but in truth, there is no Europe, rather a collection of Europes. It seems to me that the scheme that is most apt to what is now Europe, and the way in which it functions is a kind of Leibnizian paradigm, a set of monads which are all unique, but which could sing together in harmony. But, unfortunately, not everyone is singing from the same hymn-sheet...

Whereas in the past, we thought of Europe as having a certain coherence, which was simultaneously religious, social, political etc., today this Europe does not exist except as an aspiration towards continual renewal, particularly in the cultural order. We are in a new cycle of renewal, as we have identified others in the past, but this time we live in a precocious age and we are already weary of this relative weakness. In any case, we may always seek to renew ourselves, as this is the continent of Plato, of St. Thomas Aquinas, of cathedrals and of Galileo.

In conclusion, Europe is a continent which may live its mythical-cultural identity, and the Europeans had no need to be so convinced of its own decay, as they continue to be. We narrowly escaped in the last century, but were saved by those whom today, we look

up to, and with reason, for they are the ones who are masters of the world and we are not, but we were.

And in some sense, it is what it has always been. And that is Europe.

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