

## The Dichotomies of the Myth of Europe Laying at the Foundation of our Social Consciousness

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to argue that if Europeans wish to become a real Union they should pay more attention to the ethical and aesthetical values that are deep in the roots of our ancient continent, starting from the mythology. At the very heart of the myth - based story of Europe we find the dynamism of the transformation of our continent, full of beauty, charm, violence, regeneration and hybridization. The story of the „Myth of Europe“ should arouse in us the awareness that first and foremost the European race represents a social unity rather than a racial one. While talking about the “mythical Europe“, the dichotomies taken into account aim at stressing the fact that a single united Europe, within the today’s geopolitical reality, could be founded less on biological and natural factors and in a higher degree on the living memory, the shared hopes and sufferings, as well as on the self-criticism towards excessive pride and most of all on the memory of the common myths. Only by recuperating “the defiance of the common symbols” we could claim our belonging to a Community.*

**Keywords:** *Myth; aesthetic and ethic values, coexistence of dichotomies; European Union*

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### 1. Introduction

The 26 articles of the “Schuman Report on Europe: the State of the Union 2012” come together to the conclusion that “the reasons calling for Europeans to stand as one have never been as numerous as today”. (Schuman Report: 2012). At first this statement could sound unrealistic, bearing in mind the huge economic and political difficulties of many countries of the Union, as well as the too much incredulity on the future of the European Community. On the other hand this assumption can make us seriously reflect on the fact that there must be something stronger that keeps the engine of the Union going on, beyond economic or political headaches. In essence, if we are willing to ensure a long - lasting future to the “European Project” we need to forge a cultural identity starting from the very roots: from the mythical time of origins. In 2002 the European University Institute (EUI), in Florence, organized the Conference “Images and myths of Europe”, in which the former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, stated that: “These Images and Myths of Europe remind us that tomorrow’s European Union cannot be based exclusively on economics and that, if Europe is to become a positive example for the whole world, it is perhaps necessary to place greater emphasis on ethical and aesthetic values ...looking beyond day – to day concerns, however elevated they may be, is not the European Union too inclined to neglect these values? I am deeply convinced and profoundly worried, that this is the case”. (Romano Prodi: 2002).

This statement highlights the importance of a common cultural heritage, where myths are strongly connected to the symbolic production of collective identities. Without such an identity communities would not survive as units. One of the most particular symbols that characterize most communities is the existence of mythology. The representative of a School of Mythologists George Schoepflin emphasizes that “the Myth is a form of organization of a historical period in order that it may generate a common sense of understanding for a particular community” (George Schopflin: 1999). According to him the myth is a special whole of ideas with a moral content transmitted in a tale shape through the generations of a community. Myths are central to the way we live. They are not just fables, deceptions and manipulations. They are vital and necessary aspects of every community. All communities tell narratives about themselves, about who they are, how they came to be and what they are striving to do. Myths establish a coherence and a consistency for the members of a community and create the assumptions that are seen as normal and natural. (Geoffrey Hosking & George Schoepflin: 1997). The symbolic as well as the practical function of a myth often equals the ethic, aesthetic and literary character of a community.

## 2. The Myth Story



Our continent, Europe has inherited a mythological story from ancient times, that of the "Abduction of Europe" by Zeus, who disguised himself into a white bull abducted the beautiful Asian girl and brought her to the island of Crete (World book Encyclopedia:1992 p.359) She gave her name to the continent where we live today, Europe. A new civilization, named after the Asian girl spread throughout the European peninsula, in a mixture of Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek and Asian blood (Turroni:2005). Interpretations on the symbolic meaning of the girl Europe and bull deity were reproduced from ancient Greek and Roman times until today, by being updated with different historical and geopolitical realities of the European continent. This mythical figure has a crucial role in the XXI century and should be considered a cognitive instrument in order to better understand our world today. Many new problems faced by our modern society are similar to those experienced by Greek antiquity. The primary role of the symbolism of this mythology is to awaken a collective memory and to make us aware of the peaceful coexistence of diversities. Cultural diversity is a historical feature of Europe and is here to stay. (Jagland: 2012) We sincerely need to understand the importance of such role in our everyday reality.

## 3. Evolution of Symbolism

How has the symbolism of the myth evolved since its genesis? At first, Greeks intended to show what Europe was, by distinguishing it from Asia and other continents. Characteristic of this period is that Europe is never determined by itself, but in relation to something else. Thus Hesiod (770 BC), in his work *Theogony* describes Europe as "the sister of Asia", while Ovid in *Metamorphosis* labels her as "the niece of Libya." This physical confrontation led to the discussions on the geographical position, as well as on cultural, moral and political differences between Europe and non-Europe. By the 5th and 4th century BC was born a "European" (or Western) conscience versus an "Asian" (or Eastern) one which originally had a "defensive" character, but with the passing of time was transformed into an "offensive" and expansionist principle (Sinani: 2008, p.3).

Indeed in the 5th century BC, the father of the environmental theory Hippocrates, in his work *On Airs, Waters and Places* stated that Europeans and Asians differ in constitution and character because of the different geographical location of their countries. In chapters 12 – 14 he presents a comparative anthropology of Asia and Europe, while he describes Asians as *barbarians* while Europeans were said to be characterized by the sense of freedom.(De Reynold: 1957, p.483 - 496) In Book IV, Chapter V of *Politics* Aristotle mirrored Hippocrates views of Asia (4<sup>th</sup> century BC). He observed that Europeans were "full of spirit" whereas Asians were "intelligent, but lacked spirit and were therefore always in a state of subjection and slavery" (Shen Wu & C.Chen: 2009, p.6). By being courageous and intelligent Europeans lived in freedom, they were independent and governed by laws. Meanwhile, Asians obeyed to the orders of a despot.

#### 4. Generation of dichotomies

The Paradigm *Freedom versus Despotism* has generated other categories of dichotomies, such as: *West versus East*; *We versus They*; *Civilization versus Barbarism*. These dichotomies have marked the history of Europe from its remote origins until nowadays. In the course of centuries "East" was considered as the negative reflection of "West". East was denied an independent existence from West, although it has always been there to satisfy the needs of Europeans for new markets, raw materials and adventure. "East" was transformed into a passive object whereas "West" was its main actor and judge. When the categories of "East" and "West" are used as the starting point and the conclusion of an analysis then what we obtain is a further deepening of the gap between these two parts of the world.

The interpretation of the symbolism of the "Myth of Europe" aims to lead us towards an understanding which does not consider the above mentioned dichotomies with the eye of antagonism, but on the contrary as complementary to each other. In his book, *The Clash of Civilizations* Samuel P. Huntington, restores the dualism between Europe and non-Europe, but without stressing the superiority of the former. He describes the tendency of people to share the world in two parts: "While hopes for the world appear at the end of major conflict, the tendency of thinking under the concept of two separate worlds appears repeatedly throughout the history of mankind. People are always tempted to be divided into "us" and "them". Researchers have analyzed the world by using the concepts of Orient and Occident " (Huntington: 2004, p.36).

For Huntington, the dichotomies *East – West/Us - Them* are myths created by West itself. Whereas these myths promote the differences between what is our family (Europe, the West, "We") and the foreigner (Orient, East, "Them"), implying the superiority of the former against the latter. Periodic meetings between civilizations paved the way to the wrongly understood superiority of the West, where the *West* was rational, scientific, powerful, while the *East* was superstitious, tyrannical, barbarian.

"West triumphed the world not through the superiority of its ideas, values or religion (in which very few people were turning to other civilizations), but due to the superiority of organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non Europeans never forget it." (Huntington: p. 70)

If we make an analysis of the above mentioned dichotomies, we arrive at the conclusion that antagonism of dichotomies "Freedom vs. Despotism," Civilization vs. Barbarism ", " East vs. West", " Us vs. Them" is totally relative and not absolute.

##### 4.1 *Freedom versus despotism*

As mentioned above this binomial was born in Greece. Ancient Greeks highlighted the democracy of their *Polis*, or their political supremacy to compensate their economic inferiority. Oriental or Asiatic despotism was the synonym of the absolute lack of values. Not only in ancient times (with Aristotle), but even in later stages, well known thinkers and philosophers, such as Hegel, Montesquieu and Machiavelli shared the same ideas with Aristotle, about the inferiority and servile disposition of Asians. In fact Machiavelli in Chapter IV of "Prince" confronts the character of "Turku" a Monarch with an absolute and unlimited power, with that of the "King of France" whose power was limited and well balanced between the variety of powers of aristocrats and nobles. In the same way, Oriental despotism is a negative category even in the *Esprit des Lois* of Montesquieu, where it is affirmed that "despotism was supposed to be the characteristic of Asiatic nations and hot climates" (Adamovsky 2006, p.36).

The result of the antagonism between the dichotomous binomials *Freedom versus Despotism* is a further division of our continent in two opposing realities. Whereas, in the framework of a general theoretical reflection on "politics" or on "the nature of a state", the two terms "*freedom versus despotism*" could not be totally separated or opposed to each other.

Antonio Gramsci affirms that: "Each state, whatever form of government it may have, is an "integral state" conceived as a dialectical unity of power and consensus, political and civil society, dictatorship and hegemony. In other words, in our historical reality one state can go through a maximum of dictatorship (despotism) up to a minimum of hegemony (democracy) and vice versa.

##### 4.2 *Civilization versus Barbarism*

This is another relative and changeable category. In ancient Greece the slave was regarded as a "savage", a prisoner of war, a man without dignity. As previously stated, for Aristotle, a "slave" is thus by nature, because he is a passionate, instinctive and irrational being, closer to an animal rather than to a human being.

Persians were "barbarians" for Greeks, while the latter were considered "barbarians by the first Christians, who designed paganism as the denial of "the real religion." And so on, the Medieval Christianity was called barbaric, superstitious, and uncivilized by the French Enlightenment (Voltaire, D'Holbach, etc.). But with the passing of time it was exalted by Romanticism as the supreme model of the Civilization, especially by Schlegel and Novalis.

Nowadays the project of a United Europe is leading toward the extinction of the binomial "*civilization - barbarism*". In order to deny the myth of the European superiority Montaigne, who is well known for his paradoxical praise of cannibalism, stated that "Living in a natural state, cannibals are *barbarians*, while Occidentals are barbarian, because of their cruelty, so Occidentals are more barbarian than cannibals" (Longxi: 1993 p.51 – 68)

The process of building up a United Europe should focus on a severe and conscious self-criticism toward such ideologies. The way we are going to deal with our past defines our common future.

#### 4.3 East – West

In his work "Quaderni" Antonio Gramsci affirms that "North - South, East - West" are arbitrary and conventional concepts, because out of real history, every point of Earth is both East and West (Gramsci:2002, Quaderno 11).

From a geographical standpoint the terms "East" and "West" are ethnocentric and causes confusion. "North" and "South" are generally accepted as the reference point for poles. East and West have no such geographical reference coordination. The question is: East and West toward which reference point? Everything depends on one's location.

Historical experiences of the youngest EU members should make us aware that the source of numerous conflicts amongst the East and West was not due to the bad will but to the different experiences European countries have gone through. As a consequence the political division of the world into two parts "free world" and "un free world", western block front versus an Eastern bloc is an ideological division that does not reflect, but it distorts reality. In other words, contradictory categories such as Europe - Asia, West - East, are simply conventional, relative realities. It is simply all about geographical coordinates. Everything depends on the observation position. That means by changing viewpoint East becomes West and vice versa. Furthermore this dichotomy is influenced by the evolution of geopolitical concepts. For instance, up to 1990s ex-communist countries were called "Eastern Countries". In the XXI century most of them joined the so much desired "Western European Community". Nowadays the perspective of integration is offered to "Western Balkans".

#### 4.4 We and They

The antagonism between "*East and West*" is just another aspect of the resentment between: "*We and They*", where "We" has been considered better than "They". "They" stands for the foreigners who are inferiors, uncivilized and thus by principle incomparable to us. Calling the "other" as "Eastern" means to identify him as barbarous, second-class citizens, rude, traditionally unable to develop or improve. On the contrary "We" are members and defenders of civilization. The consequence of such attitude is the justification of the genocide against the "other".

By taking into consideration the above mentioned dichotomies the question that arouses is: What is the relationship between these categories – antagonism which leads to a clash between them or a change in which they can both coexist as two sides of a coin? Immediately after the WWII the liberal historian Federico Chabod, supported the first hypotheses given the fact that there is something that is not Europe, and this is Asia, which implies a comparative and "clashing" terminology between Europe and non-Europe. From a philosophical point of view antagonism is a unilateral concept, (the other is considered to be an obstacle to my evolution). This brings to deny the existence of unity, dualism, mutual exchange, or a potential mutual enrichment. Whereas accepting diversity, in reality means avoiding a permanent threat of conflict. "They/ the other"/"the different from me" is someone I should help and respect, my interlocutor and together we should build up a common future. To this end "Identity" becomes synonymous with "alteration" that means a continuous mutual development process. For the Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin: "*to be means to communicate ... to be means to be for another and through the other for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another*" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.287) Another expression of the ancient Chinese Taoist culture states that: "If beyond me there is no other then I do not exist". That means that the other is not my denial, but my "alter ego's". He is not to be considered as my outsider, but as part of my integration.

## Conclusions

A United Europe, blinded by selfishness and egocentrism shall never recognize the *Other's rights* by thus being a half that tries to be sold for the entire. In our everyday reality, "We" includes "them" and "them and us" are in a process of continuous integration and reciprocity. European Civilization, which roots derive from the Greek and Roman antiquity, is nothing else but the result of continuous historical "external" influences. The ideological approach of excluding the other from my civilization cannot bring to positive relations with him. To this end the approach of the EU citizens to newly arrived members or candidate/aspiring countries should reflect the understanding of differences as added value and not as a threat to their existence.

The influence of the aforementioned categories: Freedom versus Despotism, Civilization versus barbarism, East - West, We - They have characterized the history of Europe from the remote origins until today. Although the gap between them today is not as deep as in the past, there is still some way to go until full consciousness of member and non EU member states that the relation between these categories is just a change and not a clash. The ancient Asian origin of Europe excludes the fact of its position as the center of the world. In the same way the existence of many non-European civilizations and excludes self-European superiority, in terms of culture, morality and politics.

Christopher Dawson in his work titled "Understanding Europe" states that "Europe is not a natural entity, such as Australia or Africa, but the result of a long historical and spiritual evolution. From a geographical point of view it is a continuation of the north - western part of Asia and is characterized by a smaller physical unity compared to India, China or Siberia. From the anthropological point of view it is a mix of races. European man therefore represents a social unity rather than a racial one. And culturally, the European community is not the starting point of our European history, but the ultimate goal towards which tend to go". (Dowson: 1960 p.64)

That means Europe has not always existed. It has not been there due to a natural phenomenon that has modified its physical aspect, but for other reasons, not so much related to the natural processes, rather than to some historical and cultural events. This "beginning" of Europe is the uniqueness that will determine forever the fate of the Europeans. Everything that comes after is development and growth. The memory of this beginning lays at the foundation of our European consciousness and is even the main features of our European anthropological ethos.

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