

Europe: cultures and politics

Seminar organised by the Institut d'histoire sociale

Europe is currently experiencing a long term economic crisis but it is also one of identity which is being accentuated as it affects different cultures. This line of thought is a perilous one since it is easy to exaggerate or over simplify. This is all the more reason to look into this new situation which cannot avoid making reference to striking realities but which is also the cause of polemic: immigration, identity, culture and civilization. Given these various stakes the seminar first assessed the real idea of a “European political culture” before moving on to the present dangers of communitarianism on the Old Continent.

European Culture?

First, historian Ilios Yannakakis stressed the cultural and political return of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was part of a deep, sustainable trend, called “democratism”. The intelligentsia in these countries, often the target of repression, had ousted non-democratic regimes. Their return to Europe was a logical conclusion, the climax of a long process of the liberalisation of society from which fear was banished, taboos were lifted and the media finally started to fulfil their real mission.

Jean-François Mattéi then took over, looking into the specific features of European culture. The emeritus professor of the University of Nice believed that cultural identity, which has been in crisis since the 20th century (the “agony of the European soul” according to Paul Valéry) is not so much to do with the clash of old cultures, but with the exchange of views it has provided to the world, to the city. European thought is based on four criteria: view, abstraction, infinity and criticism. Quoted several times, Czech philosopher Patocka’s idea of “care for the soul” (human thought) is said to be the foundation of European identity and is said also to target the “universal”: “*Care for the soul is what created Europe.*” - Patocka (1981).

Jean-Dominique Giuliani, Chairman of the Robert Schuman Foundation then spoke firstly recalling that Europe was the reflection of the political project it bears, i.e. the acceptance of a certain number of political principles which served as universalism: Human Rights, rule of law and democracy. He then analysed the degree of influence of these political ideas within the ten European treaties from Rome (1957) to Lisbon (2007). He also maintained that at present, notably because of the crisis, it is not really the hypothesis of rallying around general principles which might support European identity which is becoming a reality, but the feeling, experienced by some Europeans, of a need to defend national references against the threat of their dilution in an enlarged Union. Jean-Dominique Giuliani finally concluded saying that it was more legitimate to speak of the European Union as an example to follow rather than a model for the world.

In conclusion to the first part of the seminar David Engels, a Professor of Roman History at the Free University of Brussels offered a stimulating parallel between the crisis of republican Rome and the Old Continent’s present situation at the start of the 21st century. Indeed he recalled that in the 1st century BC the Republic faced interconnected structural crises (political, economic, cultural). According to David Engels the moment when a relatively open, republican State turned into one that was authoritarian and conservative reveals disturbing similarities with the moment we are now experiencing. He said he feared an

“authoritarian u-turn” in Europe, a new “executive populism” that may overturn the “emancipation of the individual.”

Europe in danger of communitarianism

Magali Balent, Project Manager for the Robert Schuman Foundation believes that the lack of conceptual clarity over the idea of European identity is being challenged by national-populism and regionalism. In fact three issues never find consensus. Is the European Union a geographic or political construction? Is it defined by cultural, religious and historic values or by civic values? Is this identity an alternative to or an extension of national identities? Surveys note that Europeans believe there is a lack of clarity over identity, allowing the easy rise of national-populism which advocates a Europe of nations protecting and extending individual national identities based on heredity. As for regionalism, which initially emerged due to economic reasons, it now supports a Europe of non-federal regions. It is vital to redefine European identity more clearly and show that far from being an alternative to national or regional identities it is a vital complement.

According to journalist Michèle Tribalat, the integration policy is not a European competence but the responsibility of the State policy. It is facing increased resistance to assimilation, which implies an effort and the will to integrate, on the part of immigrants from the Muslim world. The generation of French citizens of immigrant origin, born in the 1980's, is indeed typified by a greater attachment to Islam and a more intense practice of the religion, in comparison with the generation which came to France in the 1960's. It is also marked by more widespread endogamy (90% of French Muslims marry other Muslims).

For his part, Pierre Rigoulot, Director of the Institut d'Histoire sociale, maintained that the debate over Islamophobia (leading to a phenomenon of rejection and hostility to the Muslim religion) was biased in our societies because it cancelled out the origin of the criticism, leaving room only for the forms of expression that this takes. Moreover criticism of a religion is not a crime in itself implying that it is a politicized debate. We cannot say that it is Islam as a religion which is being directly criticized.

Finally university professor, Shmuel Trigano, concluded the seminar probing into the deconstruction of values and democratic utopia which Europe might have to face.