Our European incapacity

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To write about xenophobia in contemporary Europe – and especially to try and uncover the enigmatic path that would take us from the desolate shores of an 'intolerant Europe', whose tendencies appear increasingly self-destructive, to the more encouraging suggestions of a "new politics of hope" is not exactly an easy task in the current conjuncture.

This is not because we lack the necessary imagination or intellectual resolve, but because the more we think about it, the more we become aware that the path is intrinsically difficult to find: it could be effective only if we could bring together contradictory exigencies. This is more than utopian, since a 'utopia' is precisely what a 'politics of hope' is about and what it requires, in the sense of delineating the objectives and values, which "concerned citizens" are striving to promote. We may find this in the Open Letter to Europe of Ash Amin and his colleagues: "Living with Diversity" (which I completely endorse). This certainly does not prevent us from thinking about conditions, forces, material and cultural interests. The difficulty becomes infinitely greater, however, when we try and define a "politics of hope" in the very terms of the figures, tendencies, conflicts, movements of the situation that it should bring to an end. Because we are not even sure that we *know* or *understand* the realities that we want to transform, in spite of the fact that we are *part of it*. We rely on analogies, and these analogies are in fact highly problematic.

Let me take one example, which indeed I do not choose at random. Increasingly in Europe one hears it said (not only on the Left, or among intellectual militants) that the current situation is reminiscent of the great political and moral crisis of the 1930s. This is more than a way of adding pathos or dramatising the discourse: there must be an element

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of intelligibility, or at least a question impossible to ignore in the fact that a major disruption of the financial and economic system, precipitating masses into joblessness and insecurity (albeit not equally across nations, even in the European space), is accompanied by the increasing disrepute of political institutions throughout Europe, and a growing influence of xenophobic ideas, feelings, and parties. Respectable political analysts argue for the heuristic function of this analogy, and they also, obviously, mean it as a serious warning not to underestimate the tragic evolution that would become possible if the genuine causes and dimensions of these phenomena (and their conjunction) were not taken into account. I agree, especially because I am alarmed by the *naiveté* of such mantras as "history does not repeat itself" or "Europe has learnt the lessons of its tragic past" (witness the construction of the European Union ...).

But I fear that the counterpart of this clarification is a blind spot covering the most enigmatic and embarrassing dimension of this political riddle, namely the contradictory reference both at the national and the transnational (or 'global') level, to democracy in a 'Europe' whose name now comprehends a totally different type of society.

Similar remarks apply to the use of the category 'populism', probably today the most widely invoked (both from inside and outside the nation) to name the xenophobic movements (most of the time strongly opposed to the "European supranational monster", and also islamophobic or hostile to minorities) which – one country after another: East and West, South and North, gain visibility and credibility on the public stage, while encouraging violent attitudes towards 'outsiders'. I hasten to add that I do not reject the term as such, especially because I am reminded of its long and ambivalent history as a political category inside and outside Europe, which it is especially worth studying in this moment.

Again, 'serious' political science seems at odds here with a contradiction impossible to resolve – possibly because it is itself *part* of the institutional system whose validity and durability is in fact challenged under the name 'populism'. We are asked not to draw a simple line of equivalence between such 'populism' and 'fascism' or 'neo-fascism' (in spite of the traditions and the men or women who transmitted a language, a culture, even an agenda from one to the other in some European countries). But we are also alerted to the fact that 'populism' (especially when adopted as a self-definition by political parties) is clearly a euphemistic name for *racism*, especially that kind of racism (by no means entirely new) that

targets cultural difference and national origin as 'inassimilable' by the 'national community': was not this discourse precisely the main defining characteristic of fascism, which provided its discourse, its culture, in the end its mode of government with the 'interior enemy' against which it claimed to defend the nation?

In a mirror image, there is a divergence between those theorists and analysts for whom a 'populist' movement is essentially 'reactionary', in the etymological sense, inasmuch as it expresses frustrations and anger against the transformations of contemporary societies and against the new 'elites' who have appropriated positions of power; and those theorists for whom it brings back (even in a mystified, or destructive way) an element of popular contestation of power, and resistance to the 'de-democratisation' of neo-liberal 'democracies', a *voice of the voiceless* without which politics becomes reduced to the technocratic 'governance' of social tensions which are deemed both inevitable and inessential (since they do not involve *historical alternatives*).

But even the first theorists are led to explain that it would be self-defeating for liberal democracies to ignore the element of truth and legitimacy involved in the 'populist' attacks against the corruption and the unlimited greed of the political-economic elites, or the mystification of the political life which resides in the fact that 'left' and 'right' governments basically implement the same policies. And the second are embarrassed to explain why a 'popular' reaction against the progressive neutralisation of every conflict with a meaningful social or cultural content, which has become the golden rule of 'governmentality' penetrating the (anti) political culture of the ruling elites in our countries, should coincide with an obsession with the decomposition of the national tissue, or the 'loss' of the cultural heritage of the nationals involved. Unless you implicitly admit a 'Schmittian' notion of political conflictuality as inextricable from the absolute primacy of the nation-State. Or also, even more problematically, you admit that the 'popular classes' are by their very nature, their social condition, etc., more inclined to enter into the conspiracy theories of the political, in which 'elites' and 'rulers' essentially aim to import outsiders, migrant workers, asylum seekers, and more generally foreigners, in order, first to provoke xenophobic and racist feelings in the masses, and second to exploit them as an instrument to undermine every revolutionary, or even progressive agenda ...

I do not believe that we can easily disentangle the political dilemmas involved in these oscillations (and I especially do not want to 'resolve' them by resorting to some pre-established 'class analysis'). But I would like to offer some complementary hypotheses to start reflecting on the *specific set of contradictions* that seem to crystallise in the current crisis, even extending the complexity of its antitheses into the political projects through which we *hope* to overcome it. They are expressed both in terms which pointedly refer to Europe and at the same time to the obstacles to European construction. This is not meant to suggest that further steps in that construction – changing nothing in its dominant representation – would form a solution *per se* (on the contrary, I tend to believe that Europe, as it stands, has become 'part of the problem'). It is also not a way to suggest that similar questions are not raised in other parts of the world (on the contrary I believe that these contradictions express global tendencies, but at the same time cannot be separated from specific historical and institutional conditions). So what I want to suggest is that we should do more to analyse 'xenophobia in Europe' as a *European problem* in the strongest sense: one that Europe creates, but also one that only Europe can resolve – perhaps at the cost (and the risk) of recreating itself on different bases. In this regard we already see a difference within the analogy with the situation of the 1930s (and the rise of fascism), and with other 'populist moments' in world-history.

My first hypothesis will be, simply, that *there is again a 'national question' in Europe today*, which has been completely underestimated, if not repressed, in the debates on the conditions, the modalities and effects of European construction; whereas in fact understanding it and joining together to address it should have been a primary concern for the 'architects' of Europe. Some of the main causes of this suppression clearly lie in the fact that the ruling classes of the European nations (and especially the 'leading' nations) believed in the irresistible power of economic integration to 'homogenise' (on individualistic and consumerist bases) the societies which Europe was bringing into its common territory 'without internal borders', while at the same time fiercely resisting every idea to build channels of communication and processes of mutual recognition (through education, but also social struggles and political campaigns) which would allow the peoples to confront their histories and merge their interests. For this would also have challenged the *monopoly of representation* of these

ruling classes, both internally and at the supranational level (and thus their remaining the inevitable *intercessors* of 'their' peoples with regard to the European institutions).

In a sense this is exactly what 'populism' *says*: that Europe creates a problem for the nations (or even "destroys" them). Except that we must see the situation from an entirely opposite point of view: Europe reveals the incapacity of the nations, in the current historical moment, to resolve their problems (be they cultural or economic) in a 'sovereign' manner, while depriving them of every substantial possibility to resolve them at a different, common or interactive, level – thus becoming themselves 'post-nations', or, better still, 'post-sovereign nations', *which is not at all the same thing as no nations,* or radically de-nationalised societies. In other terms, Europe has not really conceived (in spite of many lengthy and beautiful discourses) and even less constructed its own pluralism or "diversity", a failure, which has produced a completely 'fetishised' representation of *collective identities*, enclosing them in the stereotypes of 'invented traditions'.

It would be necessary here, of course, to go into some details about the crucial moments of this history of missed encounters and opportunities, by insisting particularly on the dramas of decolonisation (which totally displaced the reality and the image of the "stranger" in Europe), and the fall of the Cold War division (which was perceived on one side as an opportunity to resurrect historic nations crushed by totalitarian socialism, and on the other side as either the opening of a new empire, or a threat of new competitors). But I want simply to jump to a possible conclusion: xenophobias in Europe are multiple, never reducible to a single pattern (and never acting anywhere in exactly the same manner), but they completely over determine each other (and perhaps with this "crisis" we have reached precisely the moment when this overdetermination generates cumulative effects). By which I mean in particular that feelings of hatred towards the 'common Other' like islamophobia (and *a fortiori* the fear of "migrants") do nothing to *unite* Europeans, contrary to the fantasies *à la Huntington* of the advocates of "Christian Europe" (or, conversely, "secular Europe"): but they add to the distrust between Europeans themselves, or sometimes they displace it and express it in the manner of a Freudian symptom. There is an element of "hope" here: it means that to work *against* this hostility among Europeans (rarely admitted, but running very deep) is *also* to create some of the conditions for hospitality with respect to the non-European stranger

(supposing that there is a fixed boundary between the "European" and the "non-European", which *is not the case*, not even juridical). Different types of "multiculturalism" are mutually interdependent.

My second hypothesis is a continuation of the first, taking into account a crucial element concerning the function of the *state* (and the *nation-states*) in the construction of the relationship of 'affiliation' between individuals and nations in the European framework, and the 'material constitution' which allows the 'citizens' of the same nation-state to *mediate their conflicts* of interest, particularly their economic interests – which is certainly not the same thing as reaching a *consensus* on the same values, sharing the same ideology, or thinking unanimously. In a sense it is just the opposite, which is the reason why, for several decades, *politics has not been abolished by the development of social policies*, but has remained active as its permanent condition of possibility.

Contrary to their own myth 'nations' are not eternal substances or entities, which subsist by inertia. They are fragile constructions, which must be permanently recreated through the achievement of institutional equilibria, therefore the setting of new relations of forces between their 'classes', or 'organic parties'. And they are also periodically threatened with losing this condition of possibility, either from inside or from outside, through wars and civil wars in the broadest sense. Now my hypothesis would be the following: inasmuch as European construction has essentially become an instrument of neo-liberal globalisation, in which financial imperatives of short-term profitability have the upper hand, and as a consequence, increasingly using its own framework as a field of competition among territories and populations – *the State has shifted from a protective function to a function of destruction of its own civil society*: not in the 'totalitarian' form, but in the 'utilitarian' form, which is hardly less violent. I am tempted to call this in Derridian terms a shift to "auto-immunity[2]". Pushed to an extreme, this would mean that the State increasingly works within society not as a set of institutions representing and mediating (even in a coercive or inegalitarian manner) communications and processes of recognition among citizens, but as a 'foreign body' which destroys the social bonds that it is supposed to protect – something which at a fantastic level at least must not be without

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2 | "The Uses of Philosophy" July 8, 2003 (http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-07-08/books/the-uses-of-philosophy/)

its relationship to the obsession with an invasion by 'foreign bodies' that riddles the current ideologies of the nation.

The state function of protection is indeed never an absolute guarantee. Furthermore it is never without its coercive, normative, and exclusionary aspects, since it is performed by what, in other places, I have called a *national-social state*, where 'social citizenship' and 'social rights' are collectively conquered, but also bureaucratically administered and riddled with all sorts of discrimination. But still, there is a dramatic contrast between such a bureaucratic administration of citizenship and a situation in which – while still pretending to be the protector of its citizens in the old sense that legitimised its sovereignty, but also claiming that this protection is transferred to the European Union itself, or to even more global and transnational instances of 'governance' – the nation state works to privatise public services, or subject them to the rules of management and accountability which hold for capitalist corporations, or actively contributes to dismantling the educational system by imposing market imperatives on learning and transferring the cultural missions of schools and colleges to massively commercialised television networks – a process which again cannot be entirely divorced from the development of populism and xenophobia, since the cultivation of ethnic stereotypes is a central orientation of these networks, together with the injection of standardised products of commercial entertainment.

I am aware that this description, if it is one, is in itself extremely brutal. The reality is one of conflicts between opposite tendencies unequally developed in different countries, but with an increasing disadvantage for the institutions of solidarity facing the forces of utilitarianism, which can count on the double support of the market and the state, or become pushed toward privatisation from within the public sphere itself. There is an extremely perverse game at work here, for which Europe appears as a justification and an objective, which, for many Europeans, seems to leave them with only one choice: either call for the suppression or the exclusion of every foreigner, every 'body' that is 'foreign' or alien, or different, in order to compensate imaginarily for the cruelty of the protector, or idealise the protector's function in the hope of *exclusively benefiting* from the inclusiveness of its restored services.

This "hope", it seems to me, is indeed a despair. I would therefore agree that we need a politics of hope, in a more authentic, less self-destructive sense – based on a conjunction of forces within and across borders. But

such a politics must construct its forces, its goals, its language, entirely anew – taking as a negative criterion the reality of the contradictions which are revealed by the coexistence of an antidemocratic Europe, and an anti-European exploitation of fears and frustrations, which are largely two sides of the same culture. It must therefore reconstruct Europe as a federation of original and diverse nations, leaving aside the myth of their State-sovereignty, but mutually enhancing their power to create and collaborate. I say "it", in an impersonal manner: but this is *our* responsibility, before it becomes "hopefully" our *capacity*.