

BEING EUROPEAN FROM YUSTE

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The European continent is named after a young woman, Europe, that Zeus, transformed into a bull, kidnapped and abandoned on the island of Crete, where she had three children. But Herodotus tells a much more realistic version of this legend. According to him, Europe, daughter of King Agenor of Phoenicia (which corresponds to present-day Lebanon), was abducted not by a god but by ordinary men, the Greeks of Crete. She later lived in Crete, where she founded a royal dynasty. Therefore, an Asian who came to live in a Mediterranean island was responsible for the name of the continent. This name seems to announce, from the earliest times, the future European vocation. A doubly marginal woman becomes its emblem: she is a foreigner, with no roots, an involuntary immigrant; she lives in the periphery, far from the mainland, on an island. Cretans make her their queen; Europeans make her their symbol. The pluralism of her origin and her openness to others became the emblem of Europe. (Tzvetan Todorov, speech of acceptance of his Chair as Member of the European Academy of Yuste, 18 June 2008)

We are in the Royal Monastery of Yuste, in the north of the province of Cáceres (Extremadura, Spain), headquarters of the European Academy of Yuste Foundation, on a cool spring morning. The monastery lies in the middle of an oak forest, where birds are singing, and we are accompanied by the vibrant sound of the water from a mountain brook. It is, therefore, an environment not unlike the one that Charles V saw when he retired to this place, at a similar age as that of the authors of this paper. Charles abdicated in Brussels at an advanced age for his time, although he was only 56, and sought in this retreat close to the thickets of Gredos the antechamber of his encounter with God. His move, as seen through our eyes, is something of an early retirement scheme and a journey to a nice place in which to cushion his *molestam senectutem*. As far as we know, Charles did not have to clear passport controls or show a residence permit. There were no Customs officers controlling his Flemish brewers' patent or local authorities hindering the establishment of a small brewery in the monastery. A polyglot, Charles had no communication problems, and he brought with him his memory full of recollections. Long before directives regulating freedom of establishment for companies in the European Union, long before immigration control policies, long before Schengen, Charles V took decisions and actions that are no longer privileges reserved solely for emperors

or kings, but rather, *mutatis mutandis*, accessible to all citizens of the European Union.

The location of Yuste cannot be understood today simply with the accurate tools of the geographical positioning systems used by cartographers. It should also incorporate the dimension of time, necessary to understand why it deserved the European heritage label and why it has become a place of memory in European history. Since memory is the mechanism we use in order to understand the present, we intend to reflect on the features that show that, also in Yuste, we are Europeans. If in the classic version Europe is kidnapped by Zeus from a marginal area, symbolising the Greek god's openness to others, as shown in Todorov's quotation at the heading, in a more contemporary version, the closest thing that has been achieved so far to an entity that speaks with one voice, the European Union, also has a variable geography. Europe is but a peninsula of Asia, that conventionally begins, at least in a certain geographical tradition, in the Ural mountains— which actually do not separate anything. The construction of Europe —a truly revolutionary fact if we consider the age long history of hatred and conflict— can be conjugated in different languages and adopt different features in different countries. The reconstruction of the continent after World War II took place in fact under opposite socio-economic patterns and was respectively orchestrated by powers that lay outside the conventional geographical boundaries of Europe.

How do we notice from Yuste that we are Europeans? To begin with, the “European” presence in our lives can be perceived by the fact that much of our daily activity is governed by directives emanating from the European Union, although it is obvious that the functioning of the EU's administrative structure is far from being an exciting issue for the average European citizen. The truth is that EU institutions have taken many initiatives that bring EU citizens closer together: we have a driver's licence that is valid in all member states, a passport with a common format and colour, similar car plates. And in seventeen countries we have the Euro, a common currency that has put an end to tedious —and wasteful— cross-border currency exchanges. The 25 countries signatories of the Schengen agreement —where the United Kingdom and Ireland are absent, while it includes Norway, Iceland and Switzerland, which are not EU members— are virtually borderless. However, many citizens continue to think locally, regionally —or nationally, at best— so that there is a German, French, British or Italian public opinion, but not a truly European one. Perhaps this phenomenon stems partly from the domination of the media by American news agencies, which leak information according to interests which do not necessarily coincide with Europeans'. Some people have understood the attempts to foster a common identity in the European Union as signs of hegemony or cultural imperialism or as manipulation by Brussels eurocrats, as if being European were incompatible with being French or Tyrolean. The truth is that the European identity is an additional layer, rather than a threat, to national, regional, ethnic or other identities. It is not static. Successive EU enlargements have been adding members which do not resemble the founding countries, and the founders do not look like themselves if we compare them with the way they were in the 1950s. As is the case with our personal individuality, which is also defined by other people for whom we are “the other”, the same applies to

“Europeanness”. We are certainly considered “European” when we are outside Europe, but this owes more to a perception of us as *not* being *like* Africans, Asians or Americans rather than as *being* Europeans.

We will try to present some distinctive features of Europe, as we see them from Yuste. Europe, defined here as synonymous with the European Union, has managed to forge, through a long struggle and a series of initiatives of its citizens, their trade unions and their statesmen, a unique social system in which values such as solidarity and fairness are very much taken into account.

...strictly speaking there is no European social model, since the history of our nations is made up of peculiarities. Nevertheless, through the years there has been such convergence in national social legislations that the series of rules which have emerged are in many respects characteristic of concepts associated with Europe. The originality of this type of social relations – the *European social exception*– seems clearer when compared with American, Soviet or Asian models. [Annex I from the “Declaration of the European Academy of Yuste and the issue of ageing”, Royal Monastery of Yuste, 12 October 2004, in <http://www.fundacionyuste.es/>]

In other words, the European model is clearly identified when viewed from outside. Or when the economic depression, supposedly originated in the vague notion of globalisation, increasingly blurs the differences that exist with other models that pay less attention to the protection of the disadvantaged. In this connection, the following quotation from the same Declaration continues to be valid today:

Our model is today under strong economic constraints and, although the great majority of Europeans remain very attached to it, it is obvious that it can only survive on two conditions. First, that it adapts to the demographic and economic realities of the newborn 21st century. Second, that solidarity between social groups and generations will persist. (*Ibid.*, in <http://www.fundacionyuste.es/>)

These words point at two aspects that clearly explain one of the most tangible challenges of the EU: the demographic challenge. What we observe when leaving Yuste are two highly visible phenomena: an increasingly aging population –with all the changes that the concept of aging has experienced– and the presence of people, usually young adults and children, with a physical appearance that differs from that of the majority. They are the two sides of the same coin. In recent decades, the European population has undergone a process of increasing aging, which in the long term compromises its biological survival, since fertility rates in many European countries do not ensure generational replacement. This entails the need of importing new blood and raises the issue of immigration. For a region, Extremadura, and a country, Spain, that had until quite recently a negative migration balance –that is, more emigration than immigration– the issue of the arrival of people coming from abroad is quite new. Even more so if we consider that the arrivals have taken place in a relatively short period of time. The social perception of immigration is often distorted both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. The real figure of the foreigners that we see in our streets is approximately half of the number that we think we see (if immigrants amount to 12% of the total population we think they are 20%). So the impression of an “overflow” of

immigrants, even of an “invasion”, is in stark contrast with the reality of the figures. Regarding the qualitative aspect, phenotypes with different ethnic features from those of other foreigners who resemble the average Spanish citizen are indeed much more visible. The immediate perception of those immigrants usually overlooks the fact that their work and their contributions to the national social security are vital for the sustainability of our model. We should, thus, have a favourable attitude towards the presence and the integration of those immigrants, on the basis that it is a two-way process which will bring about a culturally richer society.¹

From our angle in Yuste, we think that European identity can best be understood precisely from the cultural perspective

European identity is mainly to be found at *the cultural level*. Europe is an idea more than a geographical or economic reality. It is the cultural dimension that makes Europe be simultaneously one and manifold, single and pluralist. The resulting tensions are a source of wealth and creativity. Any measure which reduces cultural diversity of Europe will only be harmful. In general, national identities are clearly defined and firmly established. As such, they do not necessarily imply more solidarity. All shared manifestations of a European culture should be encouraged. It is essential to have a good knowledge of one’s mother tongue, but it is also important to stimulate the understanding of other languages. Only if we have a good command of another language can we understand other mentalities. In this context, minority languages should be protected, because they are an integral part of the European cultural diversity. [Declaration of the European Academy of Yuste “Europe: A Culture for Solidarity”, Royal Monastery of Yuste, 3 June 2002, in <http://www.fundacionyuste.es/>]

This paragraph from the Declaration of the European Academy of Yuste in June 2002 points at two key aspects for the success of the EU ambitious project. In order to value our neighbours we should know them better, and this entails the need to abandon short-sighted views. In this context, we believe that European multicultural societies offer a myriad of worldviews from the same place. Each one of them contributes with its own cultural traditions, but none of them is, strictly speaking, pure, but cross-fertilised by the others. Contrary to the idea of the clash of civilisations, the fate to which we are doomed according to some analysts, we are in favour of a cooperation among them, an alliance that can prevent, through dialogue and familiarity with the others, any whim of intolerance, xenophobia or even overt racism. Like it or not, the societies we are living in and where our children and grandchildren will live will be different from the ones we knew when we were young. A critical element in the societies we have lived in is that, for the first time in at least a century, our generation has not witnessed war on European Union soil.

The dilemma faced by the concept of European citizenship is the one that arises from the pre-eminence of the national self, on the basis of the classic

¹ See Cea D’Ancona, M. A. & Valles Martínez, M. S. (Observatorio Español del Racismo y la Xenofobia – Spanish Observatory for Racism and Xenophobia) (2010) *Evolución del racismo y la xenofobia en España, Informe de 2010*. Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo e Inmigración. <http://www.oberaxe.es/files/datos/4e20230088dc8/INFORME%20RACISMO%202010.pdf>

nation-state borders, questioned by some, who pursue its disintegration, and alternative supranational –postnational, after all– solutions, better adapted to a globalisation without borders. When people say that democracy as practised in European Union countries is in crisis, the envy we felt in Spain during Franco’s dictatorship of the democratic systems enjoyed then by France or the United Kingdom comes to our minds. During the 1960s in the UK, we could hear the views of ordinary people who had lived through two world wars complaining about the indifference shown by the British youth –fully involved then in the cultural movements of the late 1960s – towards daily politics. “After the great sacrifices we made to defend and consolidate this system!”, we heard. We saw things very clearly, since at the time we did not enjoy the human, social and democratic rights they had already achieved. But, are we able today to recognise what we are enjoying as an achievement? Are we able to think of projecting these rights internally towards those who still do not have them and, outside our borders, towards the many countries that surround us? Perhaps this could be the context in which we should interpret a movement such as the “May 15” in Spain, which is also affecting other countries. It seems very clear to us that each generation has the right to rethink history, but we wish to emphasise how important it is not to forget our past, especially to try to avoid repeating the same mistakes. If a generation of Europeans was able in 1945 to overcome the hatred that had opposed some countries against others, we are confident that our present-day youth will be able to overcome the social, political and economic contradictions we are currently experiencing.

Understanding our past with a mentality that prevails over confrontation and favours compromise is precisely the aim of one of the projects sponsored from Yuste, *Classroom for Europe*, which is based on information technologies and calls for a common understanding of our history on the basis of the networks that existed in the past among the countries of our continent –and also from other continents– and which constitute a common European heritage.

In this approach, European civilization is not portrayed as a homogeneous process of dissemination from a few peaks of excellence towards the endless plains of mediocrity, but rather as a network of networks of correspondents and travelers, engaged in an ongoing and open conversation about the topics that made up this multifarious, diverse and yet coherent evolution of ideas and practices. [Declaration of the European Academy of Yuste “What All European Schoolchildren Should Learn About Europe. Towards An Interactive Curriculum on European Civilization for High School Students”, Royal Monastery of Yuste, 18 June 2008, in <http://www.fundacionyuste.es/>]

Education is a key driver in shaping mentalities and in viewing what unites us rather than what divides us, and we think this is a useful way to contribute to consolidate a Europe in which an overwhelming majority of its citizens, with their specificities, can feel comfortable. This proposal for an interactive curriculum, *Classroom for Europe* (<http://www.classroom4.eu/>), which could be interpreted as a typically European value, could also have a universal scope. While we said at the beginning that Europe could not be defined by geography alone, perhaps some of the values that have transpired through these pages might serve as valid criteria. From our common history we can learn, in our view, some important lessons that can be useful for our future. First, the

European social model is a valuable asset that should be preserved from the ups and downs of a capitalist system that is now going through a depression in many of our countries. Secondly, we think that there is a lot more to be gained by being together –that is, advocating for more Europe– than by being apart. Lastly, cultural diversity is our most valuable heritage, our real DNA, since we are all, to a larger or lesser extent, the result of a superposition of peoples and cultures. Its main feature should be that the culture of the Other is also part of our own.

The fact that we are reflecting on these matters from Yuste proves that you can be European from anywhere, no matter how far you may be from the big urban centres where decisions are made and where European policies are hatched. The smallness of this old monastery becomes a symbol of the greatness of the European project.

