FLEXIBLE EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP AND THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF EDUCATION IN EUROPE TODAY

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In this paper, I want to encourage you to think of the European Union as a teaching kit and thinking aid for democratic criticism and active citizenship. The treaties, the multiple publications, the entire intellectual and institutional itinerary of the making of the EU is a large, ever-evolving archive. A data-bank of accumulated ideas, aspirations and experiences, it bears witness to the collective effort aimed at constructing an alternative European social space. The EU is a transformative project that entails the re-definition of the interrelation of the member states, but also of the power-relations within each one of them.

I remain concerned by the extent of Eurosceptical attitudes, from both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum, especially among the youth today. The founding hopes that sustained the project of the European Union – peace, solidarity, sustainable growth, social cohesion and respect for the basic freedoms - are at present questioned both by some of those who live within its boundaries and in the rest of the world. The project of construction of a European democratic space is challenged by the rise of authoritarian and illiberal political regimes, many of which actively promote neo-nationalism, xenophobia and perceive the EU as an alien and even hostile entity. The cherished principle of freedom of movement has been questioned and checked by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has reinserted walls and borders. They coincide with the resurgence of micro-nationalist partitions and divisions at multiple scales and levels.

In order to grasp the complexity of the European project, we need to try to strike a critical balance. The EU is positioned simultaneously as a major player within the global economy and as an alternative social space richly endowed with progressive elements. The transformative potential of this project not only counter-acts the aggressive aspects of neo-liberalism on a number of key issues, such as workers' rights; digital privacy; telecommunication; technological monopolies; genetically modified food, climate change and the Green New Deal. But it also stresses the need to reflect back on darker chapters of our history and especially to meditate on the dangers of Euro-centrism as a frame of mind and action. These aspects of the European project constitute two sides of the same coin.

A post-nationalist space

My starting assumption is that Europe is the place that is historically obliged to reflect upon its own rich, varied and complex history. This awareness marks a qualitative shift of perspective away from the Eurocentrism of the past. Several political movements today, ranging from the Green Party to the European Social Forum, grant top priority to a post-Eurocentric vision of the European Union. The newly formed, pro-EU political party "Volt" is openly trans-national. Many progressive critical thinkers, including feminist and post-colonial scholars, are also critiquing nationalism and see its demise as a necessary step towards the construction of a new European – as in EU – sense of citizenship.

The transformative force of the EU is a process of becoming a post-nationalist, progressive European space. I rest this project on two sets of arguments: one political, the other historical. **Politically,** on the Continent, the opposition to the European Union is led by populist movements on the political Right as well as Left. In response to these negative neo-nationalist approaches, I want to defend instead a process of 'becoming-Europeans' as a way of bypassing and re-defining the binary global-local and of destabilizing nationalism through the establishment of a different sense of European citizenship. The trajectory is from Eurocentrism, nationalism and nativism, to the becoming-world of Europe.

Historically, the project of the European Union originates in the defeat of fascism and Nazism after World War II. The moral and political crisis of European 'civilization' was exemplified by the holocaust perpetuated against the Jewish, and Roma populations, as well as the persecution of homosexuals and communists by the Nazi and fascist regimes. The life and work of one of the initiators of the project of European federation - Altiero Spinelli-testifies to this, as does his wife Ursula Hirschman, and Ursula's brother Albert Hirschman. The project of the EU is consequently grounded in anti-fascism, anti-nationalism and anti-militarism. It was imposed on the European nation-states as a punishment for two Franco-German wars that spilled over into world wars. In the context of the Cold War throughout the 1950's, the new European community, as a showcase of Western culture opposed to the Soviet empire, also played the role of streamlining the reconstruction of Europe's war-torn economy.

The two branches of my argument – the political and the historical - converge upon a single conclusion: that the European Union as a progressive project means a site of possible

political transformation of nationalism, xenophobia and racism, bad habits that are endemic to the old imperial Europe. This also entails a critique of the self-appointed missionary role of Europe as the alleged centre of the civilized world. Both historically and politically, the project of European unification involves a process of critical self-reflexion and consciousness-raising. The progressive vision of Europe promotes a re-grounding of this false universalism into a more situated, grounded perspective.

It follows therefore that the question of citizenship within the European Union constitutes a rupture from it and a transformation of the past: it is a post-nationalist project. This entails a multi-scalar set of changes, in legal, economic and social measures, but it also requires a change in the cultural narratives that construct the social imaginary. People dwelling in the European region have inherited a narrative based on the myth of cultural homogeneity, much as multiculturalism is the founding political myth of the United States. Of course, European history at any point in time provides ample evidence to the contrary: waves of migrations from the East and the South make a mockery of any claim to ethnic or cultural homogeneity in Europe, while the persistent presence of Jewish and Muslim citizens challenges the identification of Europe with Christianity. Nonetheless, the myth of cultural homogeneity is crucial to the tale of European nationalism and the social imaginary it supports.

In our era, these myths are being exposed and exploded into questions related to exclusion, entitlement and new modes of citizenship. Thus, the European Union is faced with the issue: can one be European and Black or Muslim? How do the social axes of sexualized and racialized differences intersect with and affect the practices of European citizenship? One of the very transformative implications of the project of the European Union is to point out the limitations of a universalist approach. The universalist stance consists in adopting a grandiose pose, speaking in the name of humanity as a whole. That abstract universalism strikes me as a dis-embodied and dis-embedded reference, which fails to do justice to the diversity of ways of being Europeans in the world today. The poly-lingualism and variety of cultural identities and traditions are one of the main resources of the EU. In the framework of the European Union, Europeans get the chance to speak from a very specific geopolitical, cultural and historical location. I see this as a re-grounding exercise, embedded and accountable. It strives to voice the lived experiences of Europeans in all their diversity and

multiplicity. The common denominator is that they function within the larger legal framework of a trans-national European citizenship, applied across the board.

The consequence of this process of re-grounding the Europeans' self-understanding and rejecting universalism, is not only political, but also cultural. It allows for a critique of the centre from within the centre, a critique of Eurocentrism by anti-nationalist Europeans, thereby increasing the democratic spectrum. And the European Union social space is in constant need of critical analyses in terms of the new power relations that have emerged within the EU, a deficit of democratic participation, rising xenophobia, to name but a few of the contemporary challenges. I am thinking especially of the new mechanisms that police access to full European citizenship, notably in the Balkans, or the South-Western regions of Europe. I am also thinking of the plight of the asylum seekers and migrants who are attempting to reach the EU, undergoing unimaginable suffering and discrimination along the way. Critical voices within the centre are crucial to redress the balance of democratic criticism, solidarity and respect for human rights.

Flexible European Citizenship

My strategy in this regard is to support the claim of European citizenship as an open and multi-layered project, not as a fixed or given essence. I define the European Union project as transformative in being able and willing to confront historical and social contradictions and turn them into spaces of critical resistance. The legacy of colonialism, enslavement, authoritarianism, wars and violence are all part of the contradictions that need to be accounted for, in the critical effort to re-think what Europe stands for.

The practice of flexible citizenship describes two basic principles: a performative idea of citizenship based on "acting as" European citizens. That means respecting the rules of Law and functioning within them. The second is the de-linking of the three basic units that used to compose citizenship: one's ethnic origin or place of birth; the nationality or bond to a nation state and the legal structure of actual citizenship rights and obligations. These three factors are disaggregated and dis-articulated from each other and become re-arranged in a number of interesting ways. This trend towards flexible citizenship is not unique to the EU and in many ways it is a defining trait of the global economy. But it acquires a specific inflexion in EU citizenship laws.

Flexible citizenship operationalizes a radical re-structuring of Europe as a post-nationalistic space. A disaggregated idea of citizenship emerges, as a bundle of rights and benefits that can accommodate both native citizens and migrants. This would allow all 'others' – all kind of culturally diverse citizens, born outside the EU member states – to partake of the rights and duties of active participation and legal status, through flexible and performative forms of citizenship. This post-nationalistic sense of flexible citizenship, in the new framework of the European Union is an attempt to accommodate cultural diversity while upholding European liberal democracies and the universal idea of individual human rights.

For all the citizens of the Member States of the European Union, regardless of where they were born, the new European citizenship rests on the re-combination of the three elements discussed above: nationality, citizenship, ethnic and cultural identity. Being born in a member state places you on a fast lane to becoming European, but it does not exonerate you from that process of becoming. Such a European notion of citizenship, both grounded on and disengaged from national foundations, sets the premises for a new kind of civil society, that stretches beyond the boundaries of any single nation-state. Because such a flexible notion is an integral part of citizenship in the European Union, European citizens end up functioning together without belonging to one centralized and homogeneous sphere of cultural, linguistic or ethnic reference. Potentially, this notion of citizenship could therefore lead to a new concept of political participation, no longer confined to the nation-state. This is a way of thinking locally and acting globally, taking full accountability for the new trans-national European space, while actively re-grounding citizenship according to a more flexible model.

Conclusion: collective imagining

A post-nationalist sense of European identity and of flexible citizenship does not come easily, and in some ways is even a counter-intuitive idea. It requires an extra effort in order to come into being, as it raises the question of how to change deeply-embedded habits of our imagination. How can such in-depth transformation be enacted?

What we are lacking is a social imaginary that adequately reflects the social realities which we are already experiencing, of a post-nationalist sense of European identity. We the people of Europe have failed to develop adequate, positive representations of the new trans-European condition that we are inhabiting in this Continent. This lack of the social imaginary both feeds

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upon and supports the political timidity and the resistances that are being moved against the European political project.

At least some of the difficulty involved is due to the lack of a specifically European – in the sense of European Union - public debate, and the absence of a European public sphere. This is reflected in the rather staggering absence of what I would call a European social imaginary. Many scholars have lamented the lack of an emotional attachment to the European dimension on the part of the citizens of the social space that is Europe. It Is not clear what a 'love for Europe' may mean, or what it takes to remedy the lack of imagination and of visionary force on the part of us all.

The project of a post-nationalist understanding of European citizenship is a great historical chance for Europeans to become more knowledgeable of our own history and more self-critical in a productive sense. The European Union as a transformative project has to do with the sobering experience of taking stock of our specific location. This is the opposite of the grandiose and aggressive universalism of the past: it is a situated and accountable perspective. It's about turning our collective memory to the service of a new political and ethical project, which is forward-looking and not nostalgic. We Europeans have to start from where we are at. This is a plea for lucidity and for grounded accountability. We need both political strategies and imaginary figurations that are adequate to our historicity.

The project of flexible citizenship as part of the-becoming post-nationalist of Europe is an ethical transformation by a former centre that chooses the path of transformative changes. Through the pain of self-criticism, 'post-nationalist Europeans' may be able to find enough self-respect to become the subjects of multiple ecologies of belonging and go into the world as flexible citizens of the third millennium.