1. Europe(s) and modernit(ies)

Eurocentrism is a product of modernity. On the one hand the temporal and spatial shrinking down of the Earth, on the other the political, economic and cultural take-off of a global centre and the reactions of the global peripheries. Yet, as some of those who have participated in this debate have pointed out, Europe’s relationship with modernity is anything but simple.

First, the metaphorical centre of modernity falls outside the continent, in the frigid waters of the northern Atlantic Ocean on whose shores the English, American and French revolutions took place. Only the northwestern corner of Europe thus belongs, or at least is geographically proximate, to that centre. All the other parts of the continent – southern, central, eastern – are at best on its fringes, at worst altogether external to it, depending on how we look at them. The centre of modernity is peripheral to Europe, in sum, whereas most of Europe is peripheral to it. Second, we could long discuss whether it is more correct to speak of an Anglo-Saxon rather than a northern Atlantic core. If it were, then France should be understood as either the geographically and chronologically first periphery, or an alternative centre offering a different version of
modernity, or both. Finally, also the Anglo-Saxon centre could be disassembled in at least two cores, one of which is European only in its origins, while the other is European indeed, but entertains a notoriously complicated relationship with the continent.

Sure enough, the roots of the English, American and French revolutions should not be looked for just in the northwestern corner of Europe, but in the entire continent and beyond. Those revolutions would become incomprehensible, for instance, were they detached from the Mediterranean legacy, Greco-Roman as well as Judaeo-Christian. The existence of those roots, however, has never implied that modernity could be peacefully accepted as an indigenous product also outside its northern Atlantic centre. On the contrary, the Anglo-Saxon and French models have often created resentment in southern, central and eastern Europe precisely because there they could be perceived (and envied) as different and more successful versions of a common tradition.

Resentment can be dealt with in many different ways. Leveraging the shared roots, geographical proximity, and latecomer's advantage to import and imitate the models of modernity and eventually catch up with them is one such way. Everywhere in peripheral Europe, modernising elites struggled to impose that solution and finally prevailed in three historical steps – post-1945, the 1970s, and post-1989. Another possible way to confront modernity is to refuse it altogether. This has been done at times, at least partially – for instance, in the Iberian peninsula in the middle part of the twentieth century -, but modernity's traction is so powerful that opting out of it has proven to be possible only temporarily. Devising an alternative form of modernity and trying to displace the centre from the north Atlantic to Moscow, Rome or Berlin has been a third and historically significant reaction of the vast and diverse European peripheries.

In 1925, in a book significantly entitled Italia barbara (Barbaric Italy), the young and then fascist intellectual, Curzio Malaparte, explained his own periphery's refusal of the modern centre with clarity, although not nearly as powerfully as Thomas Mann had done a few years earlier in the Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen. Malaparte targeted the Italian modernising elites, which using a quote by Proudhon he defined as ‘Malthusian, eclectic, liberal, bourgeois, atheistic and propertied.’ Those elites were ‘Partisans of a revolution that … we could simply call modern, and that should consist in subjugating the Italian spirit to the experience of the Reformation and to all the subsequent experiences through which, in the latest centuries, the European modern spirit has been taking shape.’ They did not ‘hesitate to proclaim themselves civilised Italians – that is, modern – and to call the others by the name of barbarians.’

They could not be more wrong, Malaparte argued. ‘All the evils that we [Italians] have suffered for almost one hundred years stem … exactly from our having tried more than
once, and always in vain, to assimilate the European modern spirit, contrary to ours.’ ‘Anglo-Saxon modernity is not made for us.’ he concluded. ‘Assimilating it would fateful bring us to irreparable decadence. What happened in Russia, a nation that is by nature opposed to the spirit of European modernity, must serve us as example.’ That Malaparte dubbed modernity indifferently as Anglo-Saxon and European shows how ambiguous the north Atlantic model was, but also that its ambiguity was quite irrelevant when looked at from the mimetic periphery.

Twenty years later, the antifascist intellectual, Carlo Levi, published his most famous novel, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, based on his experience of political confinement in Lucania. In the first page of the book, he forcefully set apart “barbaric” Italy from civilised modernity too. But sure enough, he did not side with barbarity.

‘Christ did stop at Eboli, where the road and the railway leave the coast of Salerno and turn into the desolate reaches of Lucania. Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relations of cause to effect, nor reason nor history. Christ never came, just as the Romans never came, content to garrison the highways without penetrating the mountains and the forests, nor the Greeks, who flourished beside the Gulf of Taranto. None of the pioneers of Western civilisation brought here his sense of the passage of time, his deification of the State or that ceaseless activity which feeds upon itself. No one has come to this land except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding. The seasons pass today over the toil of the peasants, just as they did three thousand years before Christ; no message, human or divine, has reached this stubborn poverty. We speak a different language, and here our tongue is incomprehensible.’

2. Europe’s Mediterranean other

If we consider the old continent’s history from an Italian standpoint, then the force of attraction of the partially European centre(s) of modernity on the European peripheries becomes particularly evident. Since the nineteenth century, Italy has been literally obsessed with the Pinocchioesque desire to turn from a pre-modern Mediterranean puppet into a modern European boy. The memory of the country’s relevance in European history and culture, from antiquity until the early Modern Age, has fuelled that obsession.

The anxious Italian desire to be a “normal” country has generated a number of consequences. First, it has made the relationship between political institutions and
society even more tense and complicated than it “normally” is, by turning the former into a would-be civilising subject and the latter into a reluctant object that must be civilised. This approach, which has weighed on Italian history since the country’s unification in 1861, has exacerbated the tendency of political institutions to insulate themselves from societal pressures, to look askance at society and to get hold of as many resources as possible. Clientelism, widespread mistrust in the state, and governmental inefficiency are all paradoxical outcomes of the backfiring of that strategy. Those outcomes become especially visible when the backfiring occurs in a representative regime.²

Second, Italy's craving for modernity has made it particularly sensitive to the international Zeitgeist. Arguably, the country had its most constructive moments when it could follow a relatively consistent and unambiguous global model: the triumphant liberalism of the mid-nineteenth century, post-1945 embedded liberalism. Conversely, when the historical context proposed a plurality of conflicting paths to modernity, Italy absorbed and reproduced those conflicts. If managing the relationship between a Mediterranean id and a European superego is difficult, juggling with several diverging superegos has proven to be intractable.

Third, a country literally obsessed with the desire to be European has produced an intelligentsia literally obsessed with the supposed failure to fulfil that desire. Thus Italian history has often been portrayed as an endless succession of betrayals of lofty ideals, good intentions turned sour, opportunities for radical change that were missed. The history of a ‘radically wrong country’, in Rosario Romeo's phrasing.³ Meanwhile, in almost 160 years of history as a single state, the country has undergone changes that the wildest revolutionaries could only dream of, and has largely closed the gap with the models of modernity that it was pursuing. Yet observers keep pointing at that gap, forgetful that it shrunk enormously. They do not focus on the changes that occurred, but on those which failed to materialise.

When writing about Italy, and especially on the post-1945 period, Anglo-Saxon observers – historians, social scientists, journalists – often take this interpretive stance. They emphasise the supposed inadequacy of the country to abide by the standards of modernity of which they themselves are, so to speak, authentic interpreters. “Italianism” could be the title of a project aimed at mapping those interpretations. Yet such a project should also take into consideration the “Italianism” – or rather the “nested Italianisms” – of the Italians, which fuelled and legitimised that of the Anglo-Saxon observers and, in their turn, were fuelled and legitimised by it.⁴

Since inferiority complexes are notoriously unpleasant, however, Italians have also happened to refuse the northern Atlantic superego and celebrate their own
Mediterranean id, like Malaparte did in *Italia Barbara*. Or to invent fascism as their own national path to modernity, even deluding themselves that it could turn into a model for others. Or they have happened to consider the alternative Soviet modernity with sympathy and also as a guarantee of national autonomy. Antonio Gramsci reinterpreted that alternative modernity so that it could exactly fit a country such as Italy, distant enough from the north Atlantic to be in urgent need of a profound cultural transformation, but not distant enough for a violent political revolution.

The argument that I have made so far does not aim to celebrate Italy’s Mediterranean id, nor to deny that the attraction of the European superego has significantly contributed to changing the country for the better. It does not exclude that Italians, while feeling peripheral when looking north across the Alps, have also felt central when they looked south across the Mediterranean or east across the Adriatic, and have imposed this “centrality” of their own on their colonial empire. Moreover, its purpose is emphatically not to recommend readings of Italian history such as that of Malaparte, let alone their political consequences. What I am arguing here, is that in the last two centuries the old continent was largely seen in Italy as an alien entity. The word “Europe” was often used as shorthand for what was in fact its northwestern corner, and served to identify an ideal model, a goal toward which Italy ought to strive with all its forces. As a consequence, the Eurocentric bias of Italian historiography has not only represented an attempt to “other” the non-Europeans, but also to have Italians acknowledge their own otherness, repent and fix it.

3. Europe’s teleology of dissolution

In the first half of the twentieth century, the mimetic game of competing modernities nearly destroyed Europe. After 1945, it left the continent divided in two parts, both looking at models whose Europeanness was at best debatable. In the course of this process, the European nation-states lost their position of pre-eminence. Yet, despite the significant effort to achieve continental integration, Europe has been unable to provide an alternative pole of attraction, historical as well as historiographical.

From the viewpoint of “which Europe?”, the 1970s represent a crucial decade. The withering away of the European tradition, social as well as cultural, accelerated markedly. Collective identities were deconstructed. And the pace of global integration hastened, too. Those changes significantly weakened the nation-states and allowed the European integration process to make the most significant leap forward in its entire history between 1979 and 1992. Europe, however, grew thanks to the momentary
feebleness of its historical internal antagonists, not out of its own inner strength. In a
cultural climate that targeted all identities for deconstruction, no solid European identity
could replace the declining national identities. Moreover, building a strong political
Europe was impossible in a moment when the political was fading away. The drivers of
historical change were economic and technocratic in nature, and European integration
itself was legitimised as necessary to make the old Continent fit for the globalising
markets.\footnote{11}

If Europe had any value, in those circumstances, it was as a virtuous example. Its virtues,
however, although historically stemming to a very large extent from north Atlantic
modernity, were presented as abstract and universal.\footnote{12} More precisely, the \textit{Zeitgeist} did
not allow them to be presented as other than abstract and universal. The old continent
was respectful of individual rights, the rule of law, and representative government. It was
the most mature example of peaceful supranational cooperation, soft leadership, and
multilateralism worldwide. It was the virtuous kernel of the globalising Earth, in sum. In
the optimistic historical climate of the 1980s, and especially in the nearly utopian one of
the following decade, this provided Europe with a mission. In the very different climate
that has emerged at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the
virtuous kernel has appeared more and more as a rather hopeless \textit{vox clamantis in
deserto}, and the compromises that it was obliged to strike have weakened its claim to
global moral leadership.

So far as one can think of European history teleologically, in sum, it seems that our
present is suggesting a teleology of dissolution rather than generation, the efforts of the
European integration project to counter that teleology notwithstanding. Of course, we
historians have all been instructed to avoid the pitfalls of teleology. Yet it is difficult not
to think that Benedetto Croce was not entirely wrong when he argued that all history is
contemporary. If today we are interrogating ourselves about the disciplinary location
and boundaries of European history, and fear that it may somehow end up crushed
between the national and the global, it is precisely because the teleology of dissolution
is weighing on us.\footnote{13}

To my mind, this leaves us historians of contemporary Europe with three options, all
fraught with shortcomings. First, we could follow a liberal path. That is, we could insist on
European integration and the fulfilment of its underlying values as the positive telos of
continental history, and on Europe as the “leader by example” of the globalising world.
On historical grounds, however, this would require both a change in the present
\textit{Zeitgeist}, in which regrettably other, very different, examples seem to have taken the
leadership, and greater consistency on the part of the European Union, in its internal as
well as in its external action. Furthermore, on theoretical grounds this would require
solving the contradiction between a value-neutral methodological version of liberalism and a value-laden substantive one.

Second, we could follow a conservative path and put the notion of a specifically European culture at the centre of our historiographic endeavours. That notion could be wide enough to encompass the rich variety of European experiences, but should also have clear-cut boundaries and a firm centre of gravity. T.S. Eliot has provided us with a profound meditation on the tension between unity and diversity which generates a vital culture in general, and a vital European culture in particular. ‘For the health of the culture of Europe two conditions are required: that the culture of each country should be unique, and that the different cultures should recognise their relationship to each other, so that each should be susceptible of influence from the others. And this is possible because there is a common element in European culture, an interrelated history of thought and feeling and behaviour, an interchange of arts and of ideas.’ Religion is at the core of that common element. Eliot continues, ‘I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith ... If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again.’

Our third and by far most likely option is that we follow a postmodern path and welcome the dissolution. That is what Levensen and Requate seem to suggest in the opening statement to this debate, when they declare that ‘it seems both scientifically and politically necessary to deconstruct old and new national myths while also deconstructing European unification myths.’ The problem with this approach is whether, and to what extent, it is possible to establish European history as a distinct field of enquiry by programmatically pursuing the aim of deconstructing all things European. As Semyonov argues in his contribution to this debate, at the end of that road Europe ceases to be ‘an object of analysis and become[s] a scale of analysis.’

Sure enough, the old continent – ancient and dense, heterogeneous yet rich with common references, covered with a thick web of exchanges and mimetic exercises, seat of multiple centres and peripheries – will never stop being an ideal place for historians who wish to transcend the national borders, to go supranational or transnational, compare cases or extricate entanglements. Scholarship on Europe can thrive and produce excellent pieces of research in this vein. But European history will remain crushed between the national and the global in what would be a deadly grip, were the national and global approaches not in a crisis, too, as befits our age of dissolution.


7. Carlo Levi, Christ Stopped at Eboli, London 2000 (first edition 1945):12. Carlo Levi was born and grew up in Turin, in northern Italy, and he was confined in Grassano, in the deep south. Italy is not only a country that perceives itself as backward and strives to imitate the European models of modernity, but it is also ‘civilisationally heterogeneous’. This further complicates its relationship with modernity.


