

The Dialogue of Cultures in Question

Panorama

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The worse the political situation gets, the more the talk of the dialogue of cultures flourishes!... It is a curious paradox to see, ever since 11th September 2001, a build-up of tensions, of crises, sometimes even of wars, while at the same time a benevolent, if not *bien pensant*, discourse proliferates. As if the one were designed to make up for the other, or rather to respond to it in a false symmetry which sounds more and more hollow.

What is the point of these incantations on the dialogue of cultures and of civilisations? Isn't it helping to create an illusion, to set up a theatre of good conscience which serves to create a stage-set at least, to give the impression that something is being done while nothing seriously unsettles the status quo and the established order? The dialogue of cultures has thus become a new magic potion, a nostrum, an assemblage of trite and empty words which are there to make a show. This dialogue depends on a kind of meta-language which permits the masking of reality, the averting of eyes from the harshness and brutality of forces seen at play in complete impunity on the political terrain.

In fact, for many political and institutional leaders, it is a matter of taking a position and acting as though the dialogue of cultures were the miracle cure for all the evils that afflict societies and nourish the great collective passions.

The first need is to put an end to this politically correct word-play, which bolsters immobilism and justifies inertia. We need to reintroduce a little thought,

debate and controversy about the relations between cultures, and especially between Europe and the Mediterranean, or to be more precise between Europe and Islam, because that is where the essential game is being played, the question of war and peace. In the last few years we have been witnessing a resort to extremes, with the multiplication of terrorist attacks, the crisis of the cartoons, the controversial remarks of the pope at Regensburg, and added to these the proliferation of anti-Muslim pronouncements and acts, with immigrants as their first victims, while on the other shore the language of violence and hatred penetrates deeper and deeper into the Arab and Muslim societies, for whom "the West," seen as an undifferentiated bloc, is the pre-eminent target.

In the face of such an increasingly confused, indeed chaotic, situation, a second requirement arises: to achieve a better articulation of the spheres, or to use the words of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze the "stage sets," between what belongs to the political world and what belongs to the cultural and artistic world. It is essential not to confound the two, which are distinct, to subordinate one to the other, or to make one the instrument of the other. Complexity and interactions are at play between the cultural and political fields, notably in the relations forged between Europe and the Mediterranean.

Obviously this does not mean having one's head in the clouds and concerning oneself only with aesthetic and artistic questions, while political and military realities create *faits accomplis* on the spot, nourishing growing passions, misunderstandings and forces of mutual rejection. The best cultural projects in the world are not going to resolve the devastating effects produced by the war in Iraq, by the daily confrontations between Israel and Palestine or by the Is-

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raeli military intervention in Lebanon which has destroyed the most essential infrastructures of that country. In any case that is neither their *raison d'être* nor their objective. There is a great confusion prevailing nowadays among political actors and institutions on the subject of the dialogue of cultures and civilisations. As if it was a miracle cure, a spiritual supplement that would make it possible to forget the violence being practised on the ground.

Yet, once this distinction of orders is recognised between what belongs to the political, the cultural and the artistic, we need to understand what is at stake in the complex interactions between these different "stage sets," because they are interconnected worlds. Political passions connect these different worlds and are fully at work in the "war-mongering" which is more and more evident on the international scene, especially between one shore of the Mediterranean and the other. The third requirement should therefore be to look this war-lust in the face so as to have, perhaps, a chance of overcoming it.

On the side of political and Jihadist Islam, the language of war with the West has been developed for a long time now. It is fed on references to the Western invasion, to the occupation of territories and to Western values widely regarded as decadent. To this Jihadist discourse against the new crusaders corresponds the militarist language, dear to American and European neo-conservatives, against "Fascislamism," which legitimises an unavoidable resort to force in the face of a civilisation which, according to Bernard Lewis, only understands that language. The martial virtues and the taste for war have to be re-discovered to confront the perils emerging from the rise of Islam and the immigrant "invasion."

Language of this kind nourishes destructive passions on both sides and lays the ground for a fearsome transition to action.

Has the Islam/West confrontation become the only possible reading of the world? Between these two blocs, separated seemingly by everything, isn't there an intermediate world that might be called the Mediterranean? As an area of contacts, neighbourhood and conflicts, can the Mediterranean reopen the field of what is possible and offer a new configuration of relations between the three continental masses of Africa, Europe and Asia? As a wide field of interactions on the intellectual and human, economic and political, symbolic and religious planes, can the Mediterranean be put forward as a ground for mediation and as the place where the coming confrontation might be averted?

If the dialogue of cultures and of civilisations has a reason for existing, it would be to give the Mediterranean a real consistency as a world of common meanings.

As an area of contacts, neighbourhood and conflicts, can the Mediterranean offer a new configuration of relations between Africa, Europe and Asia?

What does this imply?

An attempt to give the Mediterranean of today a certain consistency implies ensuring a number of conditions and multiplying well-conceived initiatives.

The first of these conditions is mobility, which is to be distinguished from migration. The rules on the circulation of persons imposed nowadays between the southern and the northern shore of the Mediterranean are draconian and humiliating. It would be impossible to count how many projects, especially cultural projects, with official backing and finance, have failed dismally for failure to obtain visas for the partners concerned. Researchers, artists, academics and even institutional actors or students involved in projects or networks connecting one shore with the other are systematically blocked. Unless this lock is sprung, which can be achieved by simple solutions such as a cultural and research passport, or by projects of wider scope, such as an Averroes programme of student mobility for the two sides of the Mediterranean, nothing can be done. This is the first matter of urgency. Europeans, who have come to take for granted a veritable right to mobility, need to appreciate the devastating effects of this invisible wall raised on the southern frontier of Europe...

To give the Mediterranean a real consistency requires multiplying places and forms of mutual acquaintance. We need to encourage curiosity in the face of temptations to withdrawal inspired by fear.

A policy of mutual acquaintance through research, for example encouraging "Mediterranean studies" as a form of meeting transcending the Islam/West or Europe/Islam opposition. This is what is attempted for example by the network of excellence in human sciences, Ramses2. But we need to go considerably further and construct a true Mediterranean of research,

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the birth in Alexandria of the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), a first initiative whose meagre endowment is in inverse proportion to the readiness to invoke it shown by political leaders who want to give the impression that something has been done. Now this Foundation, which has so far had great difficulty in finding its place, ought to be the beacon project for promoting a whole network of trans-Mediterranean places, something that the different national networks do not yet constitute. There are major initiatives to be taken in the field of cultural exchanges and of training of actors in mediation, in places where the societies of the two shores of the Mediterranean are more and more deeply penetrated by forms of retreat and mutual rejection.

To give life, sense and zest to a creative Mediterranean, in music, design, architecture, research, literature, cinema or documentary... while a destructive and obscurantist Mediterranean raises its head on the horizon and asserts itself as an increasingly likely future. The forces and the actors of creativity are there, but they are more often than not paralysed by the weight of inertia or throttled by the stranglehold of dictatorships. It is high time to shake this security-minded discourse and open new spaces of words, debates, and controversies to invent the Mediterranean of the twenty-first century, far from the soft consensuses and façade complicities of the dialogue of cultures and civilisations.

especially in the human and social sciences, in those places where the wounds of memory and the breaks of history can be addressed and perhaps overcome. A policy of mutual acquaintance through translation. We need to re-connect, in a contemporary form, with what used to exist between the 16th and the 19th centuries, the *lingua franca*, that common Mediterranean language which did so much to promote exchanges. The common language of today is translation! We need to make works and texts known, to provide foundations, landmarks and points of reference for a true mutual comprehension of the culture of the Other. The Mediterranean can be seen as a circle open to the beyond, and translation as a linking agent mutually connecting cultures! What would an immense programme of translation in all the languages of Europe and of the Mediterranean cost, compared with the cost of an assault vehicle or a fighter plane?

A policy of mutual acquaintance through images. This means support for diffusion of the kind of culture which has the greatest impact nowadays and which does not merely concern elites. A true community of images ought to be created therefore around the Mediterranean. This is what is being attempted for example by INA (French National Audiovisual Institute), through the project "Audio-visual memories of the Mediterranean" using images from television archives. But here too it is necessary to go considerably further, to create real stocks of co-production, to work on content and programmes, for example for children, in an area where the audio-visual industry is in a state of flux and where broadcasting channels multiply without concerning themselves with creative questions.

A policy of mutual acquaintance on the basis of places. The European Commission and the partner countries of the Barcelona Process have promoted