

Federalism: political realism or utopianism?

by Giulio Ercolessi

Let's recognize to Charles Lemonnier the well-deserved and long overdue place we certainly owe him in the pantheon of the precursors and first apostles of European federalism. But what are the lessons we could draw today from his experience, that of the 1867 Congress and of the decades long history of the review "The United States of Europe"?

Their aim was prophetic, many of their practical recipes still surprisingly valid, or at least very interesting even for us today. Yet, in the end, in political terms, those ancestors of us, the European federalists of today, miserably failed in their time. And the integration process took more than eighty years to move its first and uncertain concrete paces: that only happened after two attempted suicides of Europe, and when Europeans no longer were the rulers of the world, the "great powers" of many centuries reduced at best to the rank of average world powers.

For them, in the end, it was a political failure, a total defeat, we can say, because they themselves intended to act politically. Kant's "Perpetual peace" obviously was a very serious – although not devoid of irony – intellectual exercise. Lamennais's project wanted to be a viable political project.

The great dilemma of European federalism has been from the beginning – and is today – that of finding a sound balance between its highly demanding historical goals and political realism, between outlining great ideals and seizing the suitable windows of opportunity to advance those goals in the real world and through the dust and mud of actual political struggles.

The experience of Altiero Spinelli was very different from that of most of his intellectual predecessors: his experience was that of an enlightened political thinker and intellectual who, unlike many others before and after him, had also been, quite often in his life, particularly capable of managing that difficult

balance between ideals and political realism. That's why it is perhaps unfair to link his personality mostly to the Manifesto of Ventotene. Had he stuck to his original vision of federalism as an ideology supposed to transcend and overcome all the other existing ones, he would probably not have linked his name to any concrete political achievement. On the contrary, his keen sense of history led him to be able to seize the opportunities offered by the political scenarios of his time. Maybe it was a paradox, but those opportunities largely consisted in the division of Europe at the beginning of the Cold War. He, and a few true political leaders of Western Europe in the late 40ies and 50ies (a species desperately rare today), were able and prompt to convert that tragic division into the opportunity to bring together the old and new liberal democracies of continental Western Europe, with the decisive and instrumental support and leverage of the United States of America. They shaped the political civilization in which most of us were born and raised – with all its contradictions and failures, the freer, most prosperous and least unfair political civilization ever experienced by humans so far. Spinelli, the former anti-Stalinist communist, the leftist dissenter, the “third way” ideologue, was lucidly capable to see not only that his European project could only see the light as a necessary pillar of the newborn Atlantic world, but also that, in the given historical situation, that also was the best and only way to consolidate freedom and democracy in Western Europe. And yet his political realism never diverted him from the pursuit of the still unachieved project of a real federal and democratic Europe.

Our time is no longer the time of our “founding fathers”, the time of hope and confidence in the restored liberal democracy after the years of fascism, and in face of the new threat of totalitarian communism. Liberal democracy is in a crisis or at jeopardy throughout what was the Western world. Populism and demagoguery are not only questioning the fabric of constitutional parliamentary liberal democracies, human rights, open societies and open markets. They are also eroding from the inside the widespread consensus in the necessary rationality of the public debate, the indispensable basis of our “government by discussion”. And the temptation to oppose a merely romantic utopia to the new barbarians is there again.

Should the United States of Europe be our utopia? They probably were a utopia 150 years ago. They are our only realistic opportunity to survive in today's globalised world. We should not spoil this powerful argument just to run after totally unreasonable projects, dreams of world-wide federal democracy, for which the minimal prerequisite of democratic institutions and respect for human rights is simply nonexistent in most of the would-be member components: and the trend, too, does not appear favourable at all.

At the time of Lemonnier, preaching peace and freedom against a scenario of imperialist and mostly illiberal rulers was probably the only option available for our generous ancestors, who faced much harsher political circumstances than ours. But what we could see today as a totally unrealistic political project for their time was something different to many of them. That's because they could still retain an unconditional faith in the unmissable Progress of mankind, a faith that only the most naïf of us could share without much intellectual embarrassment today. That secular faith allowed them to act in a way that could now seem, in our eyes, suggested by a sort of weberian ethics of conviction, whereas it was their philosophy of history – positivistic or idealistic alike – that supported them in their certainties, whatever the seemingly contrary orientation of all the actual political powers and actors of the time. That's why today we should neither dismiss their intellectual constructions as naïf dreams, nor be tempted to build our own intellectual dreams outside any feasible connection with the dynamics of our real political life.

It was in fact only after the faith in that promised and unfailing Progress disappeared that the choice between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility became inescapable (and was actually formulated) for all contemporary political actors. Now that our democratic, liberal, Western and cosmopolitan political values can no longer be taken for granted, the path of an enlightened political realism is mandatory for us, as it already was in Spinelli's time.

And quite like in Spinelli's time, seizing the windows of opportunity offered by history should not mean being content with that. After the defeat of the European Defence Community Treaty, our founding fathers chose the road of functionalism, but they always managed to keep the door open to the creation on an "ever closer union".

In a way, our task is even more difficult today, as the functionalist road has probably delivered all that it could deliver.

On the other hand, showing our fellow Europeans the road to a more federalist integration is now, more than at the time of our founding fathers, a much more realistic, or even compulsory, endeavour.

In our globalised world, acting as a single political subject in the international arena is for us Europeans a condition for survival. Today, when the US is withdrawing from the role it has been exercising for almost seventy years, and seems no longer caring so much for the fate of its old allies; today, when we live in a much smaller world, where a few Chinese cities are reaching the economic and technological (and no longer just demographical) size of half of the largest of our old nations, it has become simply impossible for those old nations to compete, or even to have an audible say, not to mention the

possibility to exercise any sort of hard or soft or smart power, other than as Europeans.

What we can now consider to have been utopia 150 years ago is plain and necessary political realism today. What used to be Realpolitik in the age of European imperialism is now the utterly unrealistic dystopia at which so many of our fellow citizens unfortunately, and confusedly, seem to aim today – albeit with ever diminishing ambitions.

While revering and cherishing the memory of our ancestors, we should ban the phrase “European dream” from our vocabulary. It is on the basis of the ethics of responsibility that a federal reform of the European institution is mandatory today if we want to respond to the challenge posed to the foundations of our civilization. Could its first step be provided by the fluky success of Macron’s presidential bid last year, provided it is matched by a rational, responsible and smart German response, once a German government is sworn in? That is probably what we should make every effort to foster and support. Provided it is, as it seems, a step in the direction of overcoming the present and paralysing utterly intergovernmental governance of our Union.

Knowing that, even if that bid is successful, it will certainly not be the end. Our goal will not be reached so soon. But we have a new opportunity to be seized, if we want our generous ancestors’ projects to see the light in the future.