

Europe must go back to the school of the world. As a student

Europe and the Global North as a whole are being assailed by a feeling of historical and political exhaustion. After five centuries of imposing its solutions on the world, Europe seems unable to solve its own problems and hands their resolution to multinationals, through free trade treaties whose purpose is to eliminate the last vestiges of the social cohesion and environmental awareness that have been achieved after the Second World War. In the USA, Donald Trump emerges more as a consequence than a cause of the disaggregation of a highly corrupt, dysfunctional and anti-democratic political system, where the candidate who received more votes in the national elections is defeated by a candidate who has obtained three million citizens' votes less than his competitor. The prevailing belief is that there are no alternatives to the critical state the world has reached. In their recent meeting at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the world leaders have acknowledged that the world's eight richest men own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world's population; unfortunately, that has not inspired them to support policies that might help redistribute wealth. On the contrary, they urged the dispossessed of the world to improve their performance so that they may also become rich in the future.

In the meanwhile, the instruments of analysis and global social communication available prevent us from seeing that outside Europe and the Global North there is considerable social and political innovation going on, which might stimulate the search for new global solutions to ensure that the future will be politically more democratic, socially more solidary, and ecologically more sustainable. Interestingly enough, some of these solutions

have originated in European ideas and experiences (which Europe has abandoned in the meantime) reinterpreted and reconfigured in the light of the different specific new contexts and freed from dogmas and orthodoxies. Simultaneously, Europe seems to be shrinking while the non-European world is experiencing expansion. The world's future will be significantly less European than its past.

It would seem logical to think that Europe would benefit from a better knowledge of the innovative developments that are emerging throughout the world. For that to be possible, however, Europe should be prepared to question its self-image as teacher of the world, which has prevailed throughout the modern era, and imagine itself rather as a student of the world, a co-apprentice of the future together with other regions and cultures of the world. But Europe does find it extremely difficult to learn from non-European experiences, especially when they originate in the Global South, and this is due the persistence of colonial prejudice. After all, how could Europe benefit from the experiences of “more backward regions and cultures”, solutions which seem to target problems that were supposedly solved in Europe a long time ago?

How can this prejudice be overcome so that a new willingness for global mutual learning can be achieved? To answer this question, we must go back in time. The peak period of Europe's global and imperial power ended in 1945. When the peripheral countries of the Global South, many of which had been former European colonies, became independent and sought to determine their own history in a post-European world, their journey was fraught with obstacles, since Europe and the EUA questioned any attempt at a break with the capitalist system, and the Soviet Union refused to accept any alternative but its own. The non-aligned movement, which started in 1955 with the Bandung Conference, convened by presidents Nehru (India), Sukarno (Indonesia), Nasser (Egypt), Nkrumah (Ghana), and Tito

(Yugoslavia), was the first manifestation of the historic intention of designing an alternative path to the bipolar, self-contradictory view that Europe offered the world: now liberal and capitalist, now Marxist and socialist, two systems that were not exactly sensitive to the realities that existed outside of Europe, and both requiring unconditional loyalty. This dichotomization of world matters, dramatically illustrated by the Cold War, raised insoluble political dilemmas for the new political elites of the Global South, even those that were more distanced from western capitalist and communist culture, identifying in both systems twin traps based on the supremacy of the “white man”.

In the meantime, the non-aligned movement was neutralized by global neoliberalism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the so-called Third World became so diversified that it lost its specificity. But this did not prevent new solutions to continue to be devised and implemented. However, whenever they questioned the prevalence of the Global North and, particularly, of Anti-American imperialism, such solutions were violently counteracted: from the embargo against Cuba to the destruction of Iraq, Libya and Syria; from the New International Economic Order to the neutralization of BRICS (the cooperation among the so-called emerging countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The truth is that, in spite of this, the tenacity with which the peoples of the world continue to look for solutions for liberation and autonomy still amazes the analysts. My purpose is not to romanticize their tenacity or say that the resulting solutions must be accepted uncritically. It is merely a question of starting a conversation with the world, a conversation that must not be limited to a discussion of the solutions legitimated in the past by a small part of the world, the Eurocentric world. Those solutions included, successively or simultaneously, colonialism, evangelization, imperialism, neocolonialism, external aid, human rights, humanitarian assistance. Because it depended on such solutions, the non-

European world almost invariably ended up adopting them, either voluntarily or forcibly, which is the cause of its subaltern position vis-à-vis Europe and the USA. However, it never stopped thinking outside the Eurocentric box. In these times when alternatives seem to have been eliminated, this thinking is now extremely precious insofar as it can help raise the possibility of new global learnings as an alternative to stagnation and to war.

As regards Europe, this learning depends on two major conditions, though none of them compatible with immediate solutions. Both entail building a new vision of Europe. The first consists in starting a profound debate on the very concept of Europe. It is important to start by remembering that there is no official definition of “European”, at least in terms of cultural policies. How many “Europes” are there? How many countries are European countries? What does being European mean? The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany and the large-scale movement of migrants, workers and refugees throughout Europe have raised new complexities, both as concerns identities and as regards borders. For this reason, many authors argue that the “European identity” discourse is premature. In the same way as there is no such thing as “one Europe” but rather a plurality of specific and competing historical definitions of it, there are contrasting, rival “European identities”, which depend both on the designing of borders and on the perception of the nature of “Europeanness”. The border protection and immigration authorities are gradually developing their own ideas of Europe and European identity, although utterly disconnected from other levels of discussion.

The second condition, closely related to the first, has to do with what is understood by Global South as a non-European world. The South that confronts Europe as “the other” does exist both within and without Europe. In the first decades of the 19th century, Metternich, the Austrian statesman,

wrote that “*Asien beginnt an der Landstrasse*”, which means that Asia begins in a street in the periphery of Vienna, the street where the immigrants from the Balkans lived. Then, as now, the distinction between the Balkans and Europe seemed clear, as if the former did not belong to Europe. Now, the South within Europe is the immigrants; the Roma people; the children of immigrants, some of whom were born several generations ago in this same Europe, holding European passports, though not viewed as “Europeans like the others”. There is still another South within Europe which is particularly relevant to us, the South which, being geographically peripheral, is also peripheral in many other senses. I am referring to Portugal, Spain, southern Italy, and Greece. Historically there have always been two Europes, the one in the center and the one in the periphery, with the former never conceiving that it could learn something positive from the experience of the latter.

The South outside Europe has been viewed in a grossly reductionist manner since the 15th century. It was comprised of countries that provided raw materials and which later developed into consumers’ markets to be explored; countries whose natural disasters call for European humanitarian aid; countries which are unable to provide for their own population, giving rise to the immigration problem that “afflicts” Europe; countries that breed terrorists that must be fought unmercifully. This view of the Global South is still dominated by the colonial enterprise which stipulated that, irrespective of the diversity of their pasts, the peoples and nations subject to European rule were condemned to a single common future: the future that was dictated by Europe. The future of Europe thus became hostage to the limits that it imposed on the non-European world. How many ideas, how many projects were discarded, discredited, abandoned, demonized inside Europe for the simple reason that they did not serve the colonial project?

Europe must go back to school, the school of the world and of its infinite diversity. In order to learn, it must be willing to un-learn many of its

self-conceptions and many of its conceptions about the non-European world that brought it to its present place, to this zero-degree moment of social and political innovation.