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End of Europe or New Renaissance?

Alberto Gil Ibáñez

The reflections of Julien Freund (1921-1993) belong to a specific cultural context, but they extend far beyond his generation. In fact, the idea of a European decadence was already being proclaimed by philosophers of a generation prior to his (for example, Heidegger, who was born in 1889 and Ortega y Gasset, born in 1883), not to mention recurring millenarian and apocalyptic movements. However, according to most contemporary philosophers, the twilight years of the West are now closer than ever (A. Finkelkraut) and some are so certain of its demise that they have already written an epitaph (W. Laqueur).¹ However, this stance is not unanimous. An enthusiastic F. Fukuyama announced that Western culture had prevailed when the Berlin Wall fell (1989). There are authors who assure there is nothing to worry about, either because civilizations would be approaching the point of all merging into one (Y.N. Harari) or because, upon closer inspection, we are probably better off than we have ever been. This optimism has taken root in Silicon Valley, thanks to the work of Hans Rosling (*Factfulness*) and Steven Pinker (*The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now*) who argue that the world is, counterintuitively, doing much better than we think, thanks indeed to the spread of Western culture.

And yet..., we live in the age of anxiety, where depression, the use of tranquilizers and stress have become identifying traits of Western civilization (cf. S. Stossel and A. Tone). The average Western citizen consumes anxiolytics, antidepressants, antipsychotics, a wide variety of drugs, alcohol, tobacco, enormous amounts of coffee and finds it hard to sleep without pills. Depression has become the illness of those who have lost the ability to handle pressure, but also of those who have everything and still want more. Suicide is the second highest cause of violent death in the West, after traffic accidents. The richest countries (e.g. Japan) and even the most egalitarian countries (e.g. Sweden) have higher suicide rates than most countries in the Third World (Jamaica and Egypt have the lowest suicide rates). Although we strive for success, we just can't seem to find happiness.

Our society is "increasingly weak" not only due to the threat of the "*hostes extranei*" but mainly as a consequence of the actions of the "*hostes domestici*", that Julien Freund refers to. All systems end up failing or deteriorating, not so much because of external enemies or competitors, but rather because of its internal flaws or deficiencies. Internal enemies are always more dangerous because they represent a ghost threat that we usually underestimate. And this, despite the Bible teaching us that the first violent conflict took place within a family, between brothers (Cain and Abel) and it wasn't precisely the good one who won.

And who are these "*hostes domestici*"? Well, the first batch included the philosophers "of suspicion" (Paul Ricoeur). Born in the nineteenth century, their work was developed in the early twentieth century. With their best of intentions they sought to "kill" God in the name of Reason, but they did not give up on the need to have absolutes worthy of worship: starting with Hegel (Spirit of history), their inspirator; Marx (historical materialism), Nietzsche (nothingness and the eternal return) and Freud (the unconscious) did not deny a need to reach the truth. However, these new absolutes failed, both when it came to creating a new public-private ethics alternative to religious morality, and in their attempt to elevate humanity to new levels of liberty, autonomy and

conscience. Marxism somehow ended up in gulags, psychoanalysis became an endless process that even flirted with LSD and we are still waiting in vain for the coming of the “superman”.

In a second phase, as explained by Russell R. Reno (*Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism and the Future of the West*), after World War II the “strong gods” were definitely expelled, accused of being responsible for the horrors of war, authoritarianism and colonialism. This cultural mutation would begin with Popper and his criticism of Plato and metaphysics – also of Hegel and Marx –, and would consolidate under postmodernity and the “push towards” relativism (Jean-Françoise Lyotard), which tells us what it is we must reject (“anti”), but fails to describe a clear model of society we should aspire to. Thought becomes weak (Vattimo and Rorty) and society becomes not only liquid (Bauman), but gaseous as well. Everything is virtual, even money and personal relationships, now dependent on a (technological) network that traps us rather than connecting us. The logos is deconstructed (Derrida) and ethics becomes procedural (Luhmann), underestimating the values and contents (substantive ethics) that provided robustness to the system. Evil becomes insufferably banal (H. Arendt) while political parties rule in a vacuum (Peter Mair). God was killed, along with all the other Absolutes (including Reason), but subjectivism and chance are worshipped, turned into new irrational gods. Truth becomes blurred and is replaced by the concept of “sense” and later by that of “identity”. Coinciding with the moment when the revolution that was taking place in Russia turned communist (October 1917), Marcel Duchamp successfully presented a urinal he had just bought at a corner store, as a work of art in an exhibition in New York.

Postmodernism has also failed to produce a less dogmatic and freer society. Rather, dogmatism is now just as rigid and constitutes a consensus built on the discourse of political correctness. Heretics are no longer physically burned at the stake, but they will still be persecuted and forced into silence. The postmodern cultural virus, in the name of a struggle against authority, infects our social fabric and creates the silent dictatorship in which we now live and exist without us being quite aware. Indeed, no one is more a slave than he who believes himself to be free without being so (Goethe). In principle “everything is relative”, but the reality is that today agents, preaching from the new pulpits of the media and the social networks, and elected by no one, decide what is allowed (or which is the new fashion). Nor has this movement succeeded in overcoming human injustice or ignorance. The phrase “*stultorum infinitus est numerus*” is as valid today as it ever was. Knowledge is fragmented into thousands of schools and disciplines, competing to see who can dig the deepest well, without stopping to see what everybody else is doing. We live in a swamp of contradictions that reinforce each other (an endless *contradictio in terminis*) because the idea is not to solve them, but simply to hide or disguise them. The age of (mass) information has paradoxically underpinned superficial thinking and numbness.

With postmodernity we have lived as if evil didn’t exist (A. Wolfe) or as if it belonged to a past that must therefore be totally erased. But this denial, like the shadow of the unconscious itself, arises from the fear of feeling helpless in the face of something that accompanies us, a problem whose roots we are incapable of tackling (C.G. Jung). We try ignoring it or we pigeonhole it because it does not fit our idealized world view or how we see ourselves (narcissism). Every group (whether ideological or nationalist) assumes that it is the others who are evil, never themselves, as in the biblical verse where you can see the speck on your brother’s eye, but you ignore the beam in your own eye. The deconstruction (mental and emotional) of the individual has led to a situation where we bet everything on the “demand for the recognition of identity” (F. Fukuyama). Humans have a penchant for labels, ignoring that their essence derives not from any of these different

masks but from their thoughts, feelings and character, and is defined by how and why they possess (or are possessed by) them and not others.

We live in an era characterized by the forgetfulness of self and the glorification of excess. Nietzsche popularized the expression “*Nulla ethica sine aethetica*”, but for some time now we seem to have forgotten that there can be no ethics without limits: “*nulla ethica sine finibus*”. If in the past there were too many repressive rules, today the pendulum swings in the opposite direction, towards the elimination of limits and the loss of balance. It is only when we respect certain rules, the ones that count, that we can truly be free, which is what it means to be responsible. Eliminating limits (e.g. speed) is the surest way for us to crash or to run someone over. There are no longer clear rules in education either, as we forget that the mission of education is precisely to establish limits, or expanding them when justified, like when we can confirm proof of responsibility.

Is there still time to save Europe from its programmed suicide? In reality, the West is in itself a sequence of crisis and rebirths: nations that in the past were havens for pirates and robbers are today law-abiding countries and are examples of excellent education and refinement (England); countries that were synonymous with brutality and barbarism centuries ago are today environmental advocates and pacifist nations (Scandinavia); whereas those who founded Western civilization are sometimes seen as a problem for Europe (Greece, Rome or indeed Spain). Had it been China or Arabia that landed in America in 1492, the world today would probably be Asian or maybe we wouldn't have had a modern age at all. But History is never linear, and it frequently moves in spirals. Today it is common to say that the geostrategic axis is shifting unstoppably towards Asia, which basically means we would be moving back centuries.

One explanation for the rise and fall of civilizations focuses on the idea of a systemic cultural “cycle”. People facing enormous difficulties develop strong resilience, courage and inventiveness to survive and to adapt. This process leads to an improvement in living conditions that is passed on as a legacy to the next generation. Little by little they will eventually forget how hard it was for their ancestors to create the model they enjoy, and they will begin to take everything for granted or even disregard it, neglecting their own training and resolve. This will lead the system to bankruptcy and to a resurgence of the difficulties of the past, and thus the cycle begins again. Every time a society becomes too comfortable, passive, loses its values and rests on its laurels (Roman Empire), it perishes and with it much of what it accomplished. We find ourselves at such a moment now.

In this context, what is the task of our generation? We must ensure that the legacy we have received from previous generations is not lost, undertaking a new cultural renaissance. It is not about recovering Eurocentrism, this is what others do, without greater merits than us. Russia and China are engaged in an ideological rearmament program that involves building on precisely the best aspects of their history and cultural legacy (e.g. Confucius and others). Their objective is to confront the West by re-building a Greater Russia, around the philosophy of Eurasianism, and a Greater China as a re-born Middle Kingdom. In the East it would be unthinkable to show disdain for the ancient wisdom of the Vedas, the Tao or Buddhism. What is sacred is and will always be a part of politics and the collective imagination, just as understanding what we are today requires an understanding of what we have been in the past (H. Wydra). However, Westerners idolize others' past and disregard their own, ignoring that all cultures have their dark side. One only has to look at how extremely cruel and violent the process that led to the unification of Japan really was, in the 16th century.

Europe has committed errors and horrors: from religious wars to colonialism, from Communism to Nazism, all of which left many dead behind. However, despite this, without the West's contributions the world would be different today and not necessarily better. Europe's roots are Roman law, Greek philosophy, Christian humanism, scholasticism and the Enlightenment. Are we going to let the ideals of the Enlightenment –reason, science, humanism and progress– go to waste, even though they can/should be revised and adapted to our current world? (S. Pinker). Should we underestimate those who took culture to its highest levels, in music (Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Haydn, Verdi...), literature (Shakespeare, Cervantes, Dante, Goethe...) or painting and sculpture (Michelangelo, Raphael, Goya, Picasso...)?

The truth is that European civilization is neither Oriental nor Western, but rather the result of a historical integrating process that started in the East, birthplace of all great religions, it spread across the Mediterranean and following the path of the sun has gone around the world. We therefore defend the legacy of Europe/West and honour all the other legacies it has integrated. We can and should adapt our values to the modern world, but if a tree's roots are cut, it will dry and fall. For an arrow to fly strong and far, you first have to pull back the string in the bow: "*reculer pour mieux sauter*". Instead of cutting our roots, we must rethink them. There are internal threats today, but there are also some lessons we can draw from the past in order to achieve a new European cultural renaissance, avoiding a new decline towards which we seem to be heading.

In this sense, the "ethics of limits" is key to any model that aspires to be inclusive and balanced, because the umbilical cord that unites us, both as individuals and as a community, has itself limited elasticity... or tolerance. Similarly, when addressing a dichotomous analysis (black-white) we need a relational-comprehensive method, capable of comparing opposites. Once again, it is a question of finding a midpoint, avoiding any excess or naivety. The fact of the matter is that most utopias have produced thousands or millions of deaths. We will never be able to create an organization that is 100% good or bad, not only because of our natural imperfection but because of the tendency that determines that there will always be at least a 20% who will try to resist in one way or another.² But although perfection does not exist in this world, not everything is relative because there are societies that are better than others.

Will we be able to learn for once from the lessons provided by History or will we continue to walk arrogantly, oblivious, and naively towards the abyss of our self-destruction?

Notes

¹ In this article, the concept of Europe will be considered as the origin but also an essential element of the West, a wider concept that includes also "non-Europeans". However, given that these two concepts are closely related they may be used sometimes as synonyms. For explanatory purposes we leave out Russia and consider it an independent body, because of its own self-perception as an Eurasian counterweight.

² I refer to it as "Constant argenta" as a social law that rules on reality. See A.G. Ibáñez, *La Guerra cultural: Los enemigos internos de España y Occidente [Cultural War: Internal Enemies of Spain and the West]*, Almuzara, Córdoba, 2020, pp. 73-76.