Europe (in Practice): Which Culture for the Union?

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Having written close to 300 pages on Europe in theory—pages that, I am sincerely proud and thankful to say, received the recognition of the Laura Shannon Prize this year—I keep being asked one question: “Yes, but what about Europe—in practice?” I thought that there could be no better venue than this finally to address that question. And as I am told that we humanists, in the end, always like queries more than answers, I wanted to indulge a little in the commonplace that defines my profession, and offer yet another question as an answer of sorts: What could it mean, in practice, to speak of a common culture for the union?

The question is prompted by recent discussions on the European Union’s so-called “democratic deficit”: since the days of the problematic ratification of the European constitution, a growing number of observers, fearful that the union was becoming a technocratic institution fundamentally ungraspable by its demos, have insistently quoted a sentence attributed to Jean Monnet, putative architect of the Union: “If I had to do it again, I would begin with culture.”

When I started writing my talk, my concern was to show the difficulty of defining a common European culture (in the singular) by taking as examples discussions on the presumptive unity of European literature—from Goethe through Brunetière to T.S. Eliot. By the time I was done with my literary genealogy, however, I started growing a different worry: that a common culture is in fact spreading throughout Europe, and that democratic deficits are not an accident, but the very effect of this common culture.

To make my argument, I had to drop my notes on European literature. I decided, instead, to focus my attention on some constitutional questions. Which in itself should not be a bad thing: since today’s audience, and the very mandate of the Shannon Prize, is split between the “two alternating fields” (this is a direct citation from your “About the Prize” page) of the humanities on the one hand, and of history and social sciences on the other, discussing constitutions rather than literature could help me reach the other “alternating field.” But of course, this raises the question, not so much of my qualifications, but of basic coherence: What have constitutions to do with culture in general, and with literature in particular?

Well, quite a bit, as my colleague Anne Garreta reminded me at a conference on Europe last year. “To get into the general tone of the Chartreuse of Parma,” wrote Stendhal in a famous letter to Balzac dated October 30, 1840, “every morning I read two or three pages of the Civil Code.” Readers of the Chartreuse have little difficulty to recognize in Stendhal’s style the imprint of the Code: to quote at random from Stendhal’s critics, the “accurate, precise presentation of a given fact”; the utter refusal of “the hollow eloquence—à l’allemande—which infuse[d] [instead] contemporary prose”; and finally “the cadences of its short and limpid sentences.” Here is, for instance, the Code, Article 146: “Il n’y a pas de mariage lorsqu’il n’y a pas de consentement.” Period. Lapidary. Logical. Imperative. I would say: constitutive. Or Article 544: “La propriété est le droit de jouir et disposer des choses de la manière la plus absolue.” Newman observes:

[E]xpression of the legal concept [and of abstract notions such as “property”]…takes the form of a statement reduced to its essentials: neither superfluous explanations nor physical or affective colour alter its epigrammatic concision.
And here is Stendhal in the *Chartreuse*, describing how Fabrizio has just defined, epigrammatically indeed, such abstract notions as liberty, justice, and happiness of the greatest number:

The manner in which Fabrizio spoke showed that he was endeavouring to arrange his ideas so that his auditor might grasp them as easily as possible.⁶

Nor was Stendhal alone in believing that literature and constitutions had something to do with each other. Paul Valéry considered the Civil Code the greatest masterpiece of world literature, and Jules Romains recommended aspiring novelists to read nothing else than the Civil Code every night before going to sleep.

Even outside of France, the beauty of Napoleonic prose was rich in literary consequences. Heinrich von Kleist paved the way for writers to come when he interrupted the writing of *The Broken Jug*, a play on law and provincial judges, to start translating the Code. In Italy, Marco Faustino Gagliuffi, of the Order of Poor Clerks Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools—this is the English mouthful for “padre scolopio”—translated into Latin verses the whole of the Napoleonic Code. Also, Egidio Patroni devoted several pages to it in his collection of one hundred odes—the *Napoleonide*. Among the writers who measured their skills against the Code, Cesare Cantú’s *Cronistoria* mentions Quirico Viviani, Giulio Perticari, Carlo Porta, Saverio Bettinelli, Paolo Costa, Cesare Arici, Felice Romani, Davide Bertolotti, Mario Pieri, and Pietro Giordani. Compared to the sheer beauty of the Napoleonic Code, many subsequent attempts at writing constitutions, such as the Albertine statute of 1848, appeared to writers such as Giuseppe Romanelli as nothing more than “a heap of dull bureaucratic prose.”⁷

And then there is the curious story of the Italian hydroplane landing in the Fiji islands. It was told in chapters nine to twelve of *Insecticidal Patriotism*, futurist novel of “legislative adventures,” as the subtitle put it, which Mondadori published in 1939—the last of Marinetti’s novels. In Fiji, the Italian captain and his adventurous crew meet a tribe of cannibals: nice people, well-read, with jaws as noisy—writes Marinetti—“as typewriters.” In exchange for the life of the crew, the cannibals ask for a book. The captain lends them a manual for a Beauty Institute, which, as you can easily imagine, makes the learned cannibals terribly angry. Much better goes the second offer, which the cannibals accept instead quite eagerly: a copy of the Napoleonic Code. “The only qualm we cannibals have with Napoleon”—explains the chieftain—“is that he let too much good meat go to waste.”⁸

Literature’s interest in constitutions was, on the other hand, abundantly reciprocated. De Gaulle’s delight in French classicism is well known, and so is Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s “idea of putting a Greco-classical stamp on the nascent [European] constitution by placing before the preamble a quotation from the epitaph that Thucydides attributes to Pericles: ‘Our Constitution... is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole.’”⁹ It is even recorded in history that the alleged author of the Code—the little Corsican—had very precise literary predilections: Homer, he loved; Richardson and Lesage, he devoured; it was rumored that he had special armored boxes built so he could take his library with him whenever he went to war—and that was often indeed, “from the Alps to the Pyramids,” as an Italian poet neatly put it. How much of the Code’s spirit and style was contained in those boxes is still a hotly debated issue. Anne Teissier-Ensminger has devoted two books to the issue: *La beauté du droit* (1999), and *La fortune esthétique du Code Civil des Français* (2004).¹⁰
I could generalize and conclude, at this point, that a relation between literature and constitutions does exist. But I would not be telling you the whole story, because something happened since the times of the Napoleonic Code—since the times when literature and constitutions shared something in common. Here’s a poem by Edoardo Sanguineti, “Per preparare una poesia,” or “how to prepare a poem,” from the 1970s:

To prepare a poem, you take “a true event” (possibly of the same day).  

There is a similar recipe in Stendhal….

Yes, I did mention Stendhal—for the style, however; today there is no Civil Code.

The break between literature and constitutionalism is certainly also stylistic. Those of you who had the patience to read the European Constitution must know what I am talking about. The epigrammatic, precise prose worthy of a realist novel or of a poetry of fait divers has been replaced by a meandering prolixity that is more typical of the soap opera than of any sense of literariness. Here is Perry Anderson’s pointed description:

[M]ore than five hundred pages long, comprising 446 articles and 36 supplementary protocols, a bureaucratic elephantiasis without precedent…. The founders of the American republic would have rubbed their eyes in disbelief at such a ponderous and rickety construction. But so overwhelming was the consensus of the continent's media and political class behind it, that few doubted it would come into force. To the astonishment of their rulers, however, voters made short work of it.

Extrapolating from Anderson, we could say that the stylistic choices of this constitution—a constitution, incidentally, which constituted little, and more often than not sent back to other laws, protocols and treaties (as for instance in the case of voting rights)—the stylistic choices, I was saying, were also political ones: unreadability and sheer boredom were instrumental, I am inclined to believe, in furthering the union away from the people, and in making of it a technocratic institution bureaucratically planned, decided, and managed by unelected representatives—those, to put it in the terms of Jacques Lacan, who are “supposed to know.”

What happened when French and Dutch voters, against the pressing insistence and the overwhelming consensus of the continent's media and political class, voted the constitution down? A “group of wise men,” as Honor Mahony wrote on the EU Observer of September 28 2006, was convened to decide if the constitution needed a vote after all. In the end, the wise men proposed a new constitution—well, sort of new: as Ireland's premier Ahern exclaimed in a rare moment of candor, “90% of the old one is still in there.” Voters were sent back to the polls, with more precautions this time and with the relentless broadcasting of scenarios of doom in case of a new failed referendum, until the Lisbon treaty was finally ratified. As Anderson remarked, “The operative maxim of the EU has become Brecht's dictum: in case of setback, the government should dissolve the people and elect a new one.”

What I am suggesting is that something has happened in recent years that has profoundly changed the history both of European politics and of European culture. If the history of Europe from the French Revolution onward had been the history of both politics and culture coming to terms with a new social subject—the popular masses—sometimes through revolutions,
sometimes through compromises, then the history of the last fifty years or so has been, instead, the story of politics and culture trying to break away, in the name of technical expertise and “wisdom,” from those very masses; and, in so doing, from each other as well.

Let me turn now to the Civil Code. As the Tulane Law Review remarked on the occasion of its 150-year celebrations, the Code was “the legislative response to a desire expressed…by the French people” against the arbitrary and confused laws of the royal state. Style—concreteness, concision, precision—was no mere ornament, but a language that represented the people’s own desire. In this sense, legal historian Franz Wieacker, in A History of Private Law in Europe, said that the Code “had given the tone to a whole epoch,” and that it was “written in clear and ordinary language, so that everybody would know his rights.” In all fairness, the Code, an exercise in compromise after the fear of popular assemblies, was truly more concerned to give juridical form to the right of property than to the never-mentioned right to vote; and yet it had registered, even if to contain them, the popular masses as new political subject.

Similarly, in literature, new forms—among which the most notable was Balzac’s novel—experimented with new ways of understanding literature: against classicism, against ornamental rhetoric, against belles lettres—and against, above all, Aristotelian distinctions of high and low. Also, these literary works, “written in clear and ordinary language,” represented the desire of the people, along with their lost illusions, and represented that people as well, a people which until then, following the precepts of Aristotelian poetics, had appeared only in the negative comical role of the clown—literally, the colonus, the peasant—whereas the role of the hero, couched in the form of tragedy rather than comedy, was left, as Aristotle explicitly put it, to “princes, kings and queens,” that same ruling class that today is reclaiming its exclusive right in taking decisions and acting in the name of Europe. Even in literature, in short, there had been a revolution around 1799: the recognition of a new narrative subject—the people—no longer subject to the old hierarchies of high and low, tragedy and comedy, beautiful and ugly, serious and grotesque. To quote Jacques Rancière on one of the few points with which I agree with him:

[W]e can figure out, at first sight, what upset the defenders of the belles-lettres in the works of the new writers. It was the dismissal of any principle of hierarchy among the characters and subject matters … there are no high or low subject matters… style is an absolute way of seeing things. This absolutization of style may have been identified afterwards with an a-political or aristocratic position. But in [Balzac’s] time, it could only be interpreted as a radical egalitarian principle.

In the last fifty years, with the emergence of post-war avant-gardes on the one (literary) hand, and the emergence of the European Union on the (constitutional) other hand, that common culture which united literature and constitution, even stylistically, to each other and to a people to represent, has somewhat broken down. The tie between literature and the people has been broken because the former has become a matter for specialists, all organized in a perfect Taylorist line—academics, editors, producers, typesetters, marketing agents, distributors. The people? They have nothing to do with it. In the words of Luciano Bianciardi:

If we look at the general structure of our cultural life, we notice it is made for a very small public, almost a caste. In some cases, we get to the absurdity of a culture that cultivates nothing; culture in name only, but in reality sterile, infertile — some sort of mental masturbation which does neither good nor bad to anybody. We get to the
absurdity of an avant-garde that has no rearguard, that has lost contact with the majority and lost itself. Avant-gardes no longer prepare the terrain on which others will work, but meander in swamps of their own creation.  

The same has happened, alas, to European politics, of which the European constitution is but an example.

Let me be more explicit on this point. The European Union is said to be the alternative to two world wars, the lofty Kantian goal of perpetual peace among the nation-states. Yet there is another, less hagiographic way of explaining the EU as it is coming to be in practice: as an experiment, namely, in closing a centuries-long tension in European politics and culture, the tension between the people on the one hand and oligarchic rule on the other, between universal suffrage, and a politics unfettered by votes and decided by an unelected technical apparatus.

If I mention this dystopic Europe here today, it is not because I don’t believe in European Union—I do—but because it is exactly here, in the context of an institute devoted to European studies, that we should look at the danger of what Europe in practice is becoming, and cast our vote for a different one.

In the immediate post-war era of the Monnet and Schuman plans, European unification had been conceived in two ways: either as a “supranational equivalent of the nation-states… anchored in an expanded popular sovereignty, based on universal suffrage, its executive answerable to an elected legislature… In short, a democracy magnified to semi-continental scale”; or “as a limited pooling of powers by member-governments for certain—principally economic—ends, that did not imply any fundamental derogation of national sovereignty as traditionally understood.” In either case, what remained unquestioned were the post-war principles of popular sovereignty and universal suffrage, which, in these two versions of Europe, remained operative either at the level of the continental federation, or at the level of the national state. “What has come into being, however, corresponds to neither,” Perry Anderson writes:

Constitutionally, the EU is a caricature of a democratic federation… summed up in the phrase… ‘democratic deficit’…. The farce of popular consultations that are regularly ignored is only the most dramatic expression of this oligarchic structure.

At the root of such democratic deficit, Anderson implies, there are certainly corporate interests, but also—Anderson goes around the notion of hegemony a bit—a precise culturalist maneuver which aims at separating the role of the modern state, predicated since the two Western revolutions upon the principles of citizenship, suffrage, and representation, from the functioning of the market.

For Giandomenico Majone’s Dilemmas of European Integration (2005), for instance, “The essence of the European Union… is to be just a regulative authority writ large: that is, a form of state stripped of redistributive and coercive functions [we could add representative ones], purified to maintenance tasks for the market.” In this sense, Anderson contends, “Europe has, to a striking extent, become the theoretical proving-ground of contemporary liberalism.”

What “liberalism,” and more specifically “contemporary liberalism,” means here should not go unsaid. “Liberalism,” as Luciano Canfora’s philology of the term in Democracy in Europe points out, is the term that, throughout the nineteenth century, opposed democracy, “determined to protect [property owning classes] through limited suffrage.” While “democracy,” at least until 1848, was “a blanket term [that] reflects the essential unity of the battle against regimes that
we re avowedly based upon wealth,” “liberalism” was the name through which Eu ropean potentates aimed at restricting the rights to vote and to representation—as, for instance, during Louis Bonaparte’s battle for “liberal” France, culminating in the electoral law of May 31, 1850, which abolished universal suffrage and in effect removed from the electoral roll about 3,000,000 “non-property-own[ing]” Frenchmen.

However, at a historical moment such as the present, in which explicitly limiting suffrage to property-owners would be unthinkable, what Anderson calls “contemporary liberalism” has devised new strategies. The European Union has become exactly one such strategy, at the very moment when decision-making has factually been taken out of citizens’ hands to become the exclusive responsibility of a new class of consultants, technocrats, economic analysts, and supranational (i.e. non-elected) institutions. What is particularly disturbing in this picture is that this new contemporary liberalism with which the European Union is experimenting is in fact corroding the very fabric of democracy not only in Europe, but within each of its nation-states as well, where real power consistently eludes the control of the electoral body and is submitted only to what Canfora calls “the plebiscite of the markets.”

Let us not forget, in this context, that the EU is the only experiment in European history with a currency—the Euro—largely independent of state authority, and therefore independent from the control of the electorate. If a crisis occurs—say, in Greece—no elected government can decide whether inflationary or deflationary policies may be of use. Cuts in welfare services, pensions, or salaries become a destiny fated by an invisible mystical hand. To paraphrase the words that Pope Urban II pronounced at the heyday of the first Crusade in 1099, “The market wishes it.”

No elected European government, whether center, left or right, could have possibly dreamed of eroding, on its own, conquests that were the fruit of the nineteenth-century battle between liberalism and democracy. And yet, as a recent editorial for the Economist, signed by the usual “Charlemagne,” put it (July 15, 2010), every single European government will need to learn quickly to “live with disillusion.” And what was the illusion? That elected governments or citizens have any say or control over their economy. “This is where the remote, invisible "technicians" of the "European" institutions come in,” writes Canfora, in reference to similar restructurings in Italy during the left-leaning Prodi government:

The “economists” working for [supra-national] institutions have made it known that the economic planning document produced by the Italian government…“does not fit the Maastricht parameters” precisely because it is not sufficiently drastic in the matter of social policy…. Once the steel cage located “elsewhere” has been built, the battle is lost: it is just a matter of time and gradual change. The blackmail by means of “parameters” is perfect, and no workers' organization can go and fight directly against the remote and inaccessible “priests” of these parameters. Against this background the electoral plaything…continues to function. The compensation for the “soft” abolition of universal suffrage is the gracious concession by which this abolition is periodically legitimimized through elections.

I will come later to a second strategy for the “soft” abolition of universal suffrage and political representation. Before doing that, I need to make an observation, which I would like to introduce with another citation.
[W]e have seen how…governments founded on large parliamentary majorities have had to capitulate before maneuvers on the stock market and resign, despite their parliamentary majorities, handing power to the parties and the men whom the stock market trusted.\(^\text{30}\)

The citation is not from Anderson or Canfora, and, despite appearance to the contrary, describes neither a contemporary situation, nor one concerning the creation of supra-national entities such as the EU. I take it from Otto Bauer’s *Crisis of Democracy*, a text of 1936 discussing exactly how recent post-war concessions to universal suffrage not limited to property-owners were in fact equalized and rendered ineffective by economic interests. It may be worth insisting on the word “recent”: universal suffrage had been a very recent and still partial conquest in democratic Europe: 1918 in Italy, and only limited to men; 1918 in England, but with property restrictions; 1918 in Germany; and 1933 in Spain. We know what followed: once corporate interests realized that it was too difficult to control the game of parliamentary democracy with enlarged suffrage, they gradually handed over to fascism the role of political representation:

By June 1940—when Marshal Pétain, leader of a *révolution nationale* that was identical in form to fascism, signed France’s surrender to Nazi Germany and installed the anti-Semitic Vichy regime—all continental Europe…was fascist.\(^\text{31}\)

The point is that the precarious equilibrium between concessions to representation and economic interests of the propertied class, or, to put it differently, the struggle between democracy and liberalism, is neither a novelty nor a peculiarity of what Anderson calls *The New Old World*. The old Old World (so to speak) found itself in the same predicament—and between 1921 and 1944, resolved the contradiction in favor of a turn of parliamentary democracy into fascism: “As for economic democracy,” wrote Mussolini, “we favor national syndicalism and reject State intervention whenever it aims at throttling the creation of wealth.”\(^\text{32}\)

It is the entire question of fascism that needs to be reframed. Let us take the case of Berlusconi’s Italy. Anderson asks:

Could Italy be staring at the prospect of a creeping authoritarianism, once again organized around the cult of a charismatic leader, but this time based on an unprecedented control of the media—now public as well as private television—rather than squads and castor-oil? Two structural realities tell against the idea. Fascism rose to power as a response to the threat of mass insurgency against the established order from below…the second condition of Fascist success was nationalist self-assertion, the promise of an expansionist state capable of attacking neighbors and seizing territory by military force. That too has passed.... The ideological and legal framework of the EU rules out any [nationalist] break.... There is neither need, nor chance, of Berlusconi becoming an updated version of Mussolini.\(^\text{33}\)

Consoling indeed! Fascism was one historical reality, *Berlusconismo* another. And castor oil has been felicitously replaced by a media empire—although the occasional G8 reminds us of the more coercive side of hegemony.
Yet, the objective of Berlusconismo, not altogether different than that of fascism, but this time with the aid and abetting of the European Union, has consistently been that of making alternatives disappear through precise constitutional and culturalist maneuvers. I will deal with the constitution first. Berlusconi’s first step was the electoral law of 2005, designed, with the help of the post-Communist Party of Ochetto and D’Alema, to make of Italy “a normal country”—a European one, that is: Berlusconi’s and Ochetto’s objective was to create a bipolar system, with the direct election of the prime minister. Most of the work had already been done in 1993, with the Mattarella Law that introduced the so-called “mixed system” (75% of the votes accounted elect representatives through a majority system, and 25% through a proportional one). The electoral law of 2005 added a minimum of 4% in order for a party to have any seat in parliament, and a bizarrely named “majority prize” (inspired by such European beacons of democracy such as the UK), which allowed the party or coalition getting the majority of vote to gain 53.8% of the seats.

All this was done in the name of the sacred cows of the European Union: efficiency and governmental stability. Neither has obviously been realized, but what has effectively been destroyed, along with the proportional system, has been the possibility for minority interests (below 4%) to have any representation whatsoever in the parliament. “One person, one vote” is a slogan no longer applicable to the Italian system of representation—because in order for a vote to count, it has to be given, first, to a party or coalition that will likely gain (opinion polls and TV enter into the game here) at least 4% of the total votes. A vote will count more, on the other hand, if given to the party or coalition that wins the majority prize—like in a television game show, but unlike any democratic logic of one person, one vote. Hence, the disappearance of any alternative:

Thus, by a different route, the phenomenon that prevailed at the time of restricted suffrage reasserted itself: the drastically diminished representation of the less "competitive" classes.34

The elimination of proportional representation was Mussolini’s first concern as soon as he was appointed prime minister…. Today, proportional representation is discarded in the name of efficiency, because of the firm belief that it is impracticable or, more accurately, in order to sideline universal suffrage deliberately. For that is the true aim.35

Here, beyond the “cult of a charismatic leader,” some parallelism between yesterday’s fascism and today’s liberalism can be traced, from the ultimate disappearance of workers’ parties, which are no longer outlawed, but are de facto absent from the Italian parliament, up to the ultimate uselessness of the vote—unless, that is, it is given to the right party.

So, granted that contemporary Italy is not a fascist regime, I still feel it necessary to qualify such a statement by adding that contemporary Italy is no longer anti-fascist either. And what is happening to Italy seems a general European trend: Europe is quickly forgetting its very recent fascist past. Whereas fascism and anti-fascism figured prominently in post-war constitutions, the two terms are tellingly absent from the European one. The omission may be more than the innocent forgetting of a too distant past, because anti-fascism, in the whole of European history, is not a mere empirical moment, but an event signifying the intention to resolve the age-long
struggle between liberalism and democracy, between rule of the few and universal suffrage, in favor of the latter.

Let’s not forget that the willful forgetting of anti-fascism is a cultural maneuver before being a constitutional one. With the exception only of Germany, somewhat obliged to face Hitlerism, the historiography of Austria around the election of Waldheim, the French historiography of the *lieux de mémoire*, and the Spanish cultural pact of reconciliation, have all largely attempted an obliteration of both fascism and anti-fascism. In Italy, the work also began in historiography, with the research—much publicized by Italian TV and newspapers—of Renzo De Felice and Emilio Gentile. Literary criticism soon followed, for instance, with the media “case” of Ignazio Silone. The refrain was that Mussolini had a wide consensus (a fact that no one, starting with Gramsci, had ever disputed), and that in Italy everybody was a fascist one way or another. If that were true, anti-fascism made no more sense. This is the message that has been drilled into Italian heads for twenty years now.

The immediately practical outcome of these academic discussions (whoever fears the irrelevance of academia should reconsider) is the current attempt at rewriting the constitution, which, it seems, will continue, whether Berlusconi will remain in power or not. From any side of the political spectrum—Tremonti and Berlusconi in Go Italy, d’Alema in the Democratic Party, Bossi in the Northern League—the consensus, as an article from the daily *La Stampa* (June 08, 2010) summarizes, is that “it is the constitution that hinders Italy’s modernization.” The syllogism is elementary: the Italian post-war constitution was an anti-fascist one; anti-fascism meant, first and foremost, to give certain classes—non-propertied workers most notably—some representative rights that neither liberalism before 1918, nor fascism, had recognized; today that anti-fascism makes no sense; Italy needs a new, modern and European constitution.

What is at stake in these requests for a new constitution? Besides the repeated resentment for Article 1—“Italy is a democratic Republic founded on work”—the following is at stake:

1. The elimination of Article 3, which reads: "It is the Republic's duty to remove the economic and social obstacles which, by limiting in effect the liberty and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human individual and the true participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social organization of the country."

2. The elimination of Article 41: “(A) Private economic initiative is free. (B) Economic activity cannot be in contrast of public utility, and cannot damage the security, the freedom, and human dignity of the citizens.”

3. The institution of a presidential republic, with a reduced parliamentary role that is not hindered by constitutional “obstacles” (Berlusconi’s word).

Anti-fascism, in the letter of the constitution (if not in its realization) meant the possibility of creating an Italy that was different not only from fascism, but also from the kind of liberalism that created fascism. What is at stake, in other words, is the final liquidation of that possibility.

Whether Berlusconi or a proxy will succeed in rewriting the constitution is too early to know. What is certain is that, undersigned by an impressive number of kings, the Treaty of Lisbon, in which (just as an example) the only right of workers is “freedom of movement,” is clearly a European step in that direction.
What I am suggesting is that Berlusconi is not a particularly comical or aberrant case, but, if anything, the caricature of a cultural and political transformation underway in the whole of Europe. He is a Baudelairian mirror, reflecting in magnified proportions the flowers of evil of a new and hypocritical Europe. Like a caricature, he may exaggerate, and even trivialize a trait: but besides exaggerations, the desire to close a chapter in popular and representative democracy that had recently gone under the name of “anti-fascism” is, I feel, real and widespread.

It is desirable, and an institute such as the Nanovic is an essential part of this, that we start rebuilding a culture of popular participation and democracy that has been slowly eroded in the past few decades. Doing so is also, I insist, a matter of style: closing ourselves in the elitist isolation of our technical expertise only reproduces and confirms the alleged autonomy of our disciplines not from each other, but, in the end, from popular scrutiny.

Let me then conclude with a poem. After 2004, the Brussels Poetry Collective wanted to see whether they could come up with an alternative version of the constitution, which they declared unreadable and full of technical jargon incomprehensible to the demos. Their aim was not to popularize that constitution, but to reclaim Europe and the debate over it. Jean Portante, from Luxembourg, wrote the following:

ARTICLE 59: DEMOCRACY

Let us take our principles and fold them into quarters
and fold the government into quarters, too

Let’s all go to the market and sell the government
and sell our principles, too
Then give us a labyrinth that’s not too large
and a brass band playing economic tunes

And we’ll keep the labyrinth and the band
And we’ll fold the economic tunes to quarters
Let us sell the economic tunes at the market

Let us take a flag which is a scrap of cloth
or some peeled skin or a gale-force wind

Fold the cloth into quarters
and save the skin for ourselves

Let us not sell the cloth
until we have secured the skin

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Questions and Answers

I want to ask about your understanding of a more overt fascist threat in European politics today, which seems to come not from the EU but from nationalist political groups like the Front National in France. These groups are very much anti-European Union. I wonder if you would talk about the ways in which the most overt threat of fascism today may come from this sort of party politics.

That is the most visible threat, and the sort of thing we very readily associate with some sort of fascist purity. What I’m suggesting is that there is something else at stake. And my problem is not with fascism, actually, which after all had some sort of social status. My problem is with the liquidation of the discourse of anti-fascism, because I feel that this is more threatening than the right-wing parties. There are many nationalist parties; there is one even now in Sweden. But these are parties that, perhaps with the exception of the Lombard League in Italy, are very rarely going to be in control of a government. In my view, much more threatening is the way in which the right to vote or the right to count has been very slowly eroded.

Regarding the comparison you’re developing between the friends of the European Union and fascism: Does the EU lack a really simple element of a fascist regime, which is ideological purity or a one-party rule? Can we really draw parallels between the contemporary European situation and fascism as Europe has experienced it?

Once again, I am claiming a difference between what’s going on in Europe or Italy now and fascism, and that’s why I started with Anderson. Of course what is going on in Europe now has nothing to do with fascism. There are many differing elements today: the lack of accepted bureaucratic apparatus, the lack of nationalistic tensions, the lack of an historical moment which would be threatening for the constituted order. What I was trying to suggest is not that the EU is turning or Italy is turning into a fascist nightmare. What I was trying to suggest is that it’s turning into something different than what it was after the war. It’s no longer anti-fascist. There is no longer an attempt at recuperating democratic access to the government.

Could you tell us more about positive problems within Italiography and within the European Union? How you can bring democracy into this system?

For instance, we can make the discussion about constitutions in general and something that could be participatory in a way, rather than making it about this constitution which, in the end, didn’t constitute that much. A constitution should constitute something. It cannot be sent back to a previous negotiation or sometimes to a negotiation that has not happened yet. The obvious way to make Europe something different is to start discussing the situation in this Europe. But we cannot do that until the discussion about Europe is no longer prevented by the claims of alleged experts that often hinder discussion. There has been made a complete detachment between the institutions of the European Union and its citizens.

Why do you call these constitutional trends cultural conversions? And why do you identify democracy with a very peculiar form of proportional representation? Have you given undue weight to a particular form of representation?
That’s the convergence between the cultural institution and representation; what I was suggesting was that what is happening with the Civil Code is something very similar to what is happening in European culture at more or less the same time. There is a necessity which translates into a certain style, a necessity to represent and answer the needs of the majority of the population. And this strain somehow ends, perhaps in the ’50s or ’60s with the American and European intellectual avant-gardes. In politics, with the emergence of the European Union as a technical organization, this style somehow separated from the people.

On the question of the proportional system: I don’t know if I’m biased by my own nostalgia for it; I find it so very difficult to choose between either/or every time. But I must say about the proportional system, at least on a formal level, I completely agree with you about the final results. But at least it guaranteed the possibility of giving a vote to a minority party that had a voice in parliament. There was at least a guarantee of being somehow represented. Obviously it was only formal. Obviously this is the reality of politics. But now, in the example I cited, that’s not even a possibility. The choice of either/or becomes, and this is true not only in Italy, but in every European nation, a grey area in the center. And it is this very undistinguished, amorphous grey area that all coalitions are trying to occupy. So on the one hand, I do recognize that this may be a nostalgic moment for a good proportional system, but what I feel is that now I don’t have even at a purely formal level the possibility of expressing a vote that could be representative.

Some of the pressure against democracy you talked about is driven by the desire of countries like Greece to have access to international resources and markets. One way for Greece to be more democratic is to forego that access, to be self-sufficient, to say “No.” Democracy’s more important to us than the kind of wealth we can get, more important than disciplining ourselves according to the standards of banks that don’t really care about Greece. That was a part of the story that you told. But it wasn’t a very prominent part. I’m wondering what you think about this tension between democracy as something that looks like an individual country can have only at the cost of not having access to the sorts of investment opportunities that they get by adhering to the rules of international capitalism.

Basically, you’re suggesting we are between a rock and a hard place. I’m not an economist, but assuming that would be the general choice, I think we should be very, very careful about giving over all the instruments of democratic representation for things we have no control over. Do you think this is the only possibility? Can there be democracy at a lower scale of consumption that could be sustainable?

I guess if I were living in Greece I’d be very serious. Greece had an economic system that wasn’t consistent with Europe, and recent problems have exposed the lies of it all. So they’re not the only country that’s going to be in that position. If you don’t want to adhere to the rules of German bond issuers, then you cannot take bonds from them. But if you don’t choose that, how bad should I feel for the loss of your democracy? You had a choice, and you chose Germany.

Sure. Except that the choice was never made very clear. Not in Greece, not in Italy. There was the whole discussion of getting into Europe and getting into the Euro. If there had been a choice, I think, it would have been a little more palatable than this promise of unified prosperity where everybody’s going to be very happy with the Euro. But we need to pay something now for
something that has never come back to the table for discussion.

_I have a question about style, about the parallelism between literary avant-gardism, bureaucratese, and academic jargon. Where would the kind of style you are talking about come from? It can’t come from the top down, since that would involve some measure of coercion; so where would it come from?_

There was a style of the novel of Balzac, or of the Civil Code. Where would it come from? First of all from the decision that discussions are not purely technical or abstract. Of course, discussions are also technical discussions. But besides being technical discussions they’re social discussions, in a way. So this was a decision of making these discussions as technical as they are accessible, which was in a way the decision of talking about constitutions (a topic of which I know very little), rather than about talking about European methods, for instance. In other words, it’s a style that I think we need to create by forgetting the way in which we’ve been formed. Perhaps one step would be forgetting the jargon we were taught in classes.

_How do you see these tensions playing out in the next few years?_

I cannot answer how these things are going to play in the next few years with Turkey, whether Turkey is going to work. The reason that I hate the word Europeanization is because it was the word used in Italy, and other southern countries, and it assumed that this Europe somehow meant we were convinced to make certain decisions that probably did not help the country, and that ended up in major disappointments in Italy.

_Do the expansion of the European Union into Eastern Europe make finding a common cultural language more difficult and make it more likely that it will become increasingly democratic?_

This starts from the assumption that there is such a thing as a common culture now, which I’m not so sure of. The paper that I had written before this, for the same occasion, was a paper on literature. And it was a history of the attempts of defining European literature in the same Europe: it has always been very problematic to assume that the literature in a country is the same as the notion of literature in another country. Which one would become the common culture? So you’re saying now with the integration of Turkey, it would be even more difficult to find, if not a common culture, at least a common denominator between the countries. Certainly that is true of any nation of the Union; every time there is any kind of move to unity, it is more difficult to find a consensus about anything.

Except perhaps in pluralism.

That has been the recent concern in the discussion about the enlargement of the European Union, that even its political power on an international plane becomes diluted when it is difficult to find consensus. Should Turkey be in the EU or not? It’s not something that I could answer, but not because it would create more cultural confusion than what is already there.
17. Quoted in Tunc, p. 431.
22. Ibid., pp. 60-61.
24. Ibid., p. 133.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 218.
29. Ibid., pp. 218-19.
31. Canfora, p. 158.
34. Canfora, p. 216.
35. Ibid., p. 219.