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COSMOPOLITANISM AND IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

In the current debate, the notion of identity is frequently castigated as a contrived creation, giving rise to antagonism and hatred. This article aims to counter this thesis on the basis of two cosmopolitan traditions. Cultural cosmopolitanism, particularly in its original formulation as espoused by ancient Stoicism, shows that different cultural identities – ethnic, national, religious – can be not only compatible but also complementary. Conversely, political-institutional cosmopolitanism acknowledges that identities with a socio-economic foundation are inherently conflictual, yet posits that conflicting interests can be resolved within institutional frameworks (particularly the state and the supranational bodies), whose primary function is to manage peaceful coexistence in accordance with established rules. However, the two levels must never be confused. Cultural identities must not assume a political character, and institutions, in turn, must disregard any dimension of identity other than that of citizenship, i.e. adherence to the same system of rules.

Keywords: Identity, Cultural Cosmopolitanism, Political Cosmopolitanism, Stoicism, Rule of Law, Europe.

Many of the problems we face in these difficult times stem from the fact that the natural belonging to different identities is increasingly perceived today as a reason for opposition, if not open conflict, even armed conflict. Instead, by reconstructing some moments in the history

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of cosmopolitanism – especially in two of its directions – I would like to show that, conceptually at least, this outcome is not a foregone conclusion. A long tradition of cultural cosmopolitanism affirms that the multiplicity of identities – ethnic, national, religious, cultural in general – can foster fruitful forms of coexistence and mutual integration. Moreover, a well-established institutional cosmopolitanism, while recognizing the reality or at least the potential for conflicts between political or economic identities, nevertheless believes that they can be managed, if not resolved, by procedural means that tend to be global in scope. In any case, therefore, belonging to specific identities cannot be seen as the necessary cause of the conflicts we face today.

1. An anti-identity cosmopolitanism

Before considering these two cosmopolitan traditions, however, it is important to recognize that cosmopolitanism has not always served the cause of identity well. Indeed, in some of its most important manifestations, it has expressed a strongly anti-identitarian character. And this begins with Diogenes of Sinope, or Diogenes the Cynic, who seems to have been the first to call himself a *kosmopolitēs* (Diogenes Laërtius, VI, 63). According to Diogenes Laërtius (VI, 23), Diogenes is reduced to living in a *pithos*, a barrel, according to the traditional image, or rather a large jar, according to a less widespread but more probable interpretation, which is also reflected in a beautiful painting by Jean-Léon Jérôme (1860). In any case, whether barrels or jars, the meaning is clear: Diogenes rejects his civic identity, as a citizen of the *polis*, in the name of a universalist principle, the law of nature, a principle that paradoxically translates into an individualist criterion, that is, the defence of the individual against the identity constraints of belonging to a specific community. The same individualist and anti-identity model can be found to a large extent in the glorious cosmopolitan period of the 18th century, which, not by chance, often refers back to Diogenes. In the cosmopolitan attitude, the Enlightenment saw above all an opportunity for the independence of the individual from the prejudices imposed by cultural traditions and social conventions, in the name of a universal concept of 'reason' – in a sense, the 18th-century version of Diogenes' *physis*. In addition to the individualistic motivation, the rejection of cultural-political characterization in the Enlightenment is often motivated by the belief that national identity – often hastily identified with patriotism – is a source of conflict between people. Voltaire, for example, argued that to be a "good patriot" was to become an "enemy of the rest of mankind" (*Dictionnaire philosophique*, entry *Patrie*). This individualistic and anti-

identitarian rejection of socio-cultural constraints and commitments was often judged negatively as early as the 18th century. The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* notes that the cosmopolitan "n'est pas un bon citoyen". Moreover, the justifications put forward by the cosmopolitan publicists of the time to justify the fundamental right to emigrate were generally based on the Ciceronian principle that *patria est ubicumque est bene*, a principle that was interpreted in an increasingly utilitarian and hedonistic sense. As early as the 18th century, many agreed with Rousseau's accusation that the cosmopolitan hypocritically claimed to love the people of the world while failing to love his own countrymen. And a contemporary version of this critique of individualist cosmopolitanism is well represented by what Ulrich Beck has called "banal cosmopolitanism", one of the many consequences of globalization: a cosmopolitanism in which openness to the world is reduced to the standardization of mentalities and behaviors assimilated in a utilitarian function through the media and social networks by an individual increasingly indifferent to his own socio-cultural identity.

2. Stoic cosmopolitanism

Another model of cultural cosmopolitanism, which we can call "communitarian" – using the term, however, in an absolutely neutral sense, without any reference to the ideology of contemporary communitarians – seems to be more fruitful for the purposes of our discussion. This type of cosmopolitanism also has an emancipatory function, since it considers it necessary to go beyond the narrow socio-cultural confines of one's community of origin, in order to open oneself up to the world. However, it does not oppose this limited society with the anti-identity dimension of an abstract universalist concept, such as nature or reason, or even with a globalizing standardization, but proposes access to a broader dimension of community, represented by the humanity on the whole. This conceptual scheme is most clearly illustrated by Stoic cosmopolitanism. In the Greek phase of Stoicism from Zeno of Citium to Chrysippus, the universal human community still has a predominantly metaphysical character: what unites human beings is their common participation in the *logos*, in the universal reason, which is the logical-ontological principle of reality. Later, with the transition from Greek Stoicism to Roman and then Imperial Stoicism – Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius – things change. Without forgetting the metaphysical background of early Stoicism, the *cosmopolis* is now understood more concretely, especially in a moral and political key, as the totality of human beings. Despite cultural and ethnic differences, all people in the world form a single universal society, an *oikoumenē*. In political reality,

this more concrete conception was obviously contributed to in terms of political reality by Alexander the Great, who with his universalist aspirations overcame the opposition between Hellenes and barbarians, and, above all, by the expansion of the Roman Empire over almost the entire known world. The exclusive model of individualistic and anti-identitarian cosmopolitanism (*or* the *polis*, *or* the *kosmopolis*) is opposed by a concentric ("onion-layered") and, therefore, inclusive model of communitarian cosmopolitanism. This pattern is clearly outlined in Cicero's *De Officiis* (I, 17, 52-53), where the social consortium is articulated in several concentric spheres: kinship in all its degrees, *civitas*, the national and linguistic community, and finally the "universal society uniting all men". Sometimes the articulation can be reduced to two levels, as in the case of Seneca, who distinguishes between two "republics": the *magna respublica* of which "we mark the boundaries where the sun marks them" and the other "to which the destiny of our birth […] belongs" (*Ad Serenum de otio*, 4,1). In any case, whatever the number of levels, this cosmopolitanism recognizes that human beings can belong to several identities, even if it is natural to feel more attached to those closest to one's own. And this compatibility remains even when the different affiliations have dramatic aspects, as in the case of Marcus Aurelius, who had to combine the duties of an emperor, which required him to defend the state even to the point of supporting war against external threats, with those of a cosmopolitan philosopher, who had to remember that despite everything humanity is one: "my city as my homeland: as Antoninus, Rome, as man, the world" (*Meditations*, VI, 44a). Apart from a few isolated intuitions (e.g., Vico), the culture of the 16th and 17th centuries, with its defence of an individualistic form of cosmopolitanism, largely lost the sense of this integration between the particular and the general. Even when it glimpses the communitarian component of cosmopolitanism – for example when it pursues the idea of a universal *république des lettres* – it does so more to defend the individual independence of the intellectual from his culture of origin than to affirm an interpersonal community. "The philosopher is neither French, nor English, nor Florentine", Voltaire observed, "but he is of all countries" (*Dictionnaire philosophique*, entry *Cartésianisme*). We will have to wait for that delicate moment when the Enlightenment fades into a middle culture that preserves rationalism's need for clarity without getting lost in the vagueness of Romantic sentiment, in order to rediscover the Stoic claim that the particular and the universal, the local and the cosmopolitan, are compatible, or rather, complementary. This is the case, for example, of Johann Gottfried Herder, a critic of the *philosophes* but a proponent of his own original *Aufklärung*. Herder proposes a proto-historicist historiographical methodology, in which each historical reality – be it an epoch or a national identity – possesses an autonomous and incomparable cultural value that

contributes to historical progress by enhancing its overall significance. The result is an idea of humanity that is composed of a myriad of faces, that is, a colorful multiplicity of cultural characters. The more characters, the more complete the concept of humanity, which cannot be defined in abstract terms, but only by an increasing multiplicity of its identity manifestations. Multiplicity and diversity are values that are not opposed to unity and concord, but on the contrary broaden and deepen their meaning. Themes that would be taken up – in those years by Schiller in a poetic key and later, musically, by Beethoven – in the idea of an innumerable collectivity of identities, at once different and consonant, that must be able to be united in a single universal embrace ("seid umschlungen, Millionen!"): this *Ode to Joy* was to become the anthem of the European Union.

3. Two forms of identity

The "communitarian" form of cosmopolitanism that I have tried to sketch with a few examples thus allows for the notion of an inclusive identity. Unfortunately, this at least potentially inclusive dimension of identity is often contested in the current cultural debate, which from various fronts condemns the very notion of identity, understanding it as exclusive, divisive, a source of aggression, linked to the oppositional schema of inside/outside or, in Carl Schmitt's terms, friend/enemy. Jean-François Bayart's essay, *L'illusion identitaire* (1996), speaks of identity as something artificial, invented to create oppositions that produce solidarity between those who recognize themselves in it and aggressiveness towards those who do not. That this is partly the case is an undeniable fact. The unbridled arrogance of the many current "sovereignisms", domestic and otherwise, is there for all to see. But the question is whether this is the true nature of identity, that is, of that dimension without which our individuality – personal or collective – risks evaporating in a fleeting world of negative definitions. Or is it rather the result of a bad interpretation, and an even worse use, of the concept of identity. Let us take a look at some specific cases. It is well known to all that Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics, has never had any difficulty in associating his belonging to the Anglo-Saxon world with the memory of his ancestry, not only Indian, but more specifically Bengali. Similarly, the British-American writer Kwame Anthony Appiah, author of *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), strongly defends the idea of a "rooted cosmopolitanism". The son of a British writer and a Ghanaian diplomat, Appiah is part of the Anglo-Saxon culture in which he was educated and in which he holds prestigious positions, but at the same time he is proud of his Ashanti roots, an ethnic group specific to Ghana.

His cosmopolitan concept is based on the principle of "universality plus difference", in which universality undoubtedly prevails over difference, but it cannot exist without it, lest it lose all concrete content. Certainly, loyalty to different identities can create some uncertainty. When Zygmunt Bauman received an honorary degree from the University of Prague, he was asked, as is customary, which national anthem he would like to hear: that of Poland, his country of origin, or that of the United Kingdom, of which he was a naturalized citizen. At first Bauman was nonplussed, because he felt attached to both identities, albeit for different reasons, but then, at his wife's suggestion, he found the solution: "play the European anthem". And this was not a trick, as he himself explained, because he actually felt European, as well as Polish and English, and European even before Polish and English, since the European identity encompasses the other two.

An individual's cultural identities are multiple, as in the layered model proposed by Stoicism, but probably with greater mutual porosity. More precisely, they often belong to a system of relations with a double axis: horizontal and vertical. Allow me to give a personal example of a literary nature. As a Piedmontese, I have in the past been interested in dialect literature, for example in the works of Angelo Brofferio and Vittorio Bersezio (or also, for reasons of spatial and cultural proximity, in the poetry of the Milanese Carlo Porta). But, my interest in the Romans Trilussa and Gioacchino Belli or the Neapolitans Raffaele Viviani and Eduardo De Filippo has never been alien to me, because as an Italian – and here the horizontal dimension of regionality intersects with the vertical dimension of nationality – I share, albeit in different ways, the Roman and Neapolitan identities. Similarly, as a European I cannot help but feel connected to German, French, English or Spanish literature – alongside the Italian classics – which are in some way part of my European identity. Of course, belonging to the Western world and identity also allows me to be part of American culture, though with a perceived distance from European one, while I have to appeal to my cosmopolitan soul in order to get closer to "other" cultures, which are often far removed from our Western mentality, however closer a now-global communication makes them.

Besides, the problem of the relationship between globalization and cosmopolitanism deserves more attention than we can devote here. I will thus confine myself to observing *en passant* that globalization has both weakened and strengthened the cosmopolitan discourse. Weakened because, without resorting to catastrophic scenarios of a clash of civilizations, it has undoubtedly, by bringing together cultures with very different values, created situations of conflict that often cannot be resolved with the simple Ciceronian reference to *ratio* and *oratio*. But globalization

has also had the positive effect of making us aware, through daily contact with immigrant cultures and the diversity of their values and behaviors, that humanity is plural and diverse, that it is a multicultural humanity. And that is why our cosmopolitan sensibility needs to be updated and improved over what it might have been fifty years ago.

This general framework challenges another objection often raised in the current polemic against identity: that identity is something stable and permanent, something essentialist, almost akin to a substance, precisely bounded and unambiguously defined. Hence, again, its oppositional and aggressive valence. But cultural identities have no precise boundaries at all. It has already been mentioned that the identities attributed to different forms of Western culture are highly permeable to each other. But this also applies to the relationship with "immigrant" cultures. As much as they are tied to the traditions to which they belong, immigrants necessarily live in a state of hybridity between their original culture and their adopted one, in terms of language, social relations and often also values. Identity is thus a fluid system, in which each partial identity is inseparable from and constantly merges with the others: it is only by emphasizing one or the other that we can define them as specific identities. As Amartya Sen puts it in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006: xiv): "We have to see clearly that we have many distinct affiliations and can interact with each other in a great many different ways". Not one identity, then, but a collection of different identities. For each individual, rather than a defined identity, one should speak, as Bauman, the philosopher of "liquidity", suggests, of a "non-cohesive" identity, which always remains open and is never completely clear, even to the subject to whom it refers.

4. Institutional cosmopolitanism

The mutual compatibility of the different cultural identities I have been talking about requires, however, that they not be confused, as is often the case, with another form of identity. This is the identity of a broadly socio-economic or politico-economic type, centering on the defence of interests and the allocation of resources. Social groups, professional lobbies, institutional or political communities, up to and including state societies, are much more rigidly defined identities than cultural ones: as a result, they naturally and rightly tend to defend their interests in competitive conditions, sometimes generating forms of conflict. But in reality, the mutual competitiveness of socio-economic identities – which is undeniable – can and must reach a settlement, or at least be negotiated, in a forum that has nothing to do with the cultural dimension: the world

of socio-political institutions. The fundamental function of institutions is to resolve interests and conflicts by recognizing common procedural rules, regardless of any identity characterization. Now, the more extensive this institutional network is, moving from infra-state to state and then from state to international (at least at the macro-regional level, as is happening in Europe), the more the benefits of the rule of law extend. For the belief that conflicts can be resolved to one's own advantage, everyone for himself, everyone with his own muscle-flexing, is a pure illusion in today's globalized world.

This is why, historically, what we have called communitarian cosmopolitanism has often felt the need to take on a political dimension, providing for the institutional management of conflicts. That is, it has often developed into forms of institutional cosmopolitanism. Already in antiquity, the idea of a universal human community was often associated with the idea of a cosmopolitan state. Diogenes and Zeno speak of a universal *polytheia*, and the term *kosmopolis* appears in the works of Chrysippus. But this was a metaphor rather than a reference to a real political structure. The Stoics of the Roman era were well aware of this, and while they retained the same reference, they also emphasized its metaphorical function linguistically. Cicero calls the universal human community *quasi communis deorum atque hominum domus, aut urbs utrorumque* (*De natura deorum*, 2, 154, italics mine). And Marcus Aurelius, aware of the distance separating the *kosmopolis* from the global empire he presided over, argues that in the cosmopolitan perspective "we all participate in a kind of government, therefore the *world is like a city*" (*Meditations*, IV, 4, italics mine). It is only in modern times that the proposal for a supranational and cosmopolitan institution is explicitly put forward, in terms that are certainly still ideal (and in some cases utopian) but no longer metaphorical.

The leaven that swells this demand is the reflection on war, that is, on the phenomenon that, more than any other, casts identity as a function of hostility and violent opposition. Since at least the 17th century, modern political culture has been littered with works that seek to put an institutional end to war. At the pinnacle of this production is *Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Project* (1795) by Immanuel Kant, which extends the model of the social contract developed by the earlier natural law tradition from the inter-individual to the international level. Kant proposes two possible solutions: the first is a world state which, in perfect analogy with individual civil societies, has a central government with coercive powers; the second solution applies the contract analogy imperfectly, proposing not a universal state but a simple confederation of peoples which acts as an international body for the arbitration of disputes, while preserving the national sovereignty of the member states. With realism, Kant himself

chose the second path, the confederation, although he considered it a "negative substitute" for the "state of peoples", the only solution capable of guaranteeing universal peace. It was this more cautious model that would tentatively appear in real political history, first with the League of Nations, which Woodrow Wilson, perhaps inspired by Kant, wanted so much at the end of the First World War; then with the United Nations at the end of the Second World War. We know how the League of Nations turned out, just as we know that the UN's weaknesses in international crises are evident, especially today. But the seed has sprouted; the tree has begun to bear fruit. First, because the creation of a world institution to manage international relations, however weak and ineffective it may be, is always better than mere anarchy. Moreover, we should not forget all those parallel realities that have contributed to the institutionalized management of the cosmopolis, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the four Geneva Conventions on the humanitarian law of war, the International Criminal Court in The Hague, and so on.

Above all, the principle of the institutionalization of international relations, whose outcomes have been very disappointing at the global level, has produced much more concrete results at the macro-regional level. The slow process of integration that has led to the creation of the European Union, despite its alternating periods of rapid progress and moments of stalemate, is probably – we hope – an irreversible political reality: in addition to guaranteeing eighty years of peace, this process has promoted a long period of concerted action and institutional management of interests in Europe that is unlikely to be reversed, even in unfavorable times such as those we are living through today.

5. A problematic but not hopeless conclusion

In my discussion I have clearly distinguished the cultural level, where individual identities can be spontaneously compatible, from the institutional level, where the conflict of interests can be procedurally settled. The mistake that is increasingly made in so-called "sovereignist" arguments is to confuse the two levels. That is, to believe, on the one hand, that national cultures are inseparable from the interests of states, and, on the other hand, that the competition inherent in economic and political subjects is necessarily reflected in cultures, creating an international rivalry that affects all aspects of a people's life. This is an error with powerful historical roots: the centuries-old legacy of the concept of the nation-state. This concept has been highly innovative in modern Europe – from the formation of the first nation-states in the 15th and 16th centuries to the

territorial reunifications in Italy and Germany in the second half of the 19th century. But this function should now be superseded in the reality of the European Union, which should instead take as its model, if anything, the small Swiss Confederation, where the dimensions of the (unitary) state and the national culture (with three identities, or four if the Ladin "nation" is also taken into account) are clearly separated. One of the advantages of globalization is that it has spurred the gradual separation of state and culture by weakening the functions of statehood.

The first step in correcting this sovereignist drift, then, is to understand that political institutions, insofar as they are based on reconciling divergent interests through shared rules, must be neutral with respect to specific identity characterizations. They must not be contaminated by elements of cultural, religious, ideological or value-based identity, nor by any other generic element of identity (gender, race, wealth, sexual orientation). The only identity permitted is that of being subjects who recognize themselves in the same political-legal order, i.e., in the same system of rules and procedures. In other words, the only recognized identity is citizenship, which cancels out any other specific identity. It is thus not a question of politicizing cultures, by acknowledging the political value of their diversity and by politically managing the conflicts that may arise from them – as is sometimes advocated today, even by authoritative voices – but, on the contrary, of neutralizing cultures, of depoliticizing them, in order to confine the management of conflicts to institutions that must preserve the function for which they were born.

In a fine film by Steven Spielberg, *Bridge of Spies* (2015), a convincing Tom Hanks plays James Donovan, appointed as legal counsel to a Russian spy whom the American public wants to see severely punished after his exposure. Donovan opposes a government official who tries to persuade him to listen to this *vox populi* by failing in his institutional duty to loyally defend the accused – and thus to abide by the rules – Donovan opposes, noting that the official, judging from his surname, is of German descent, whereas he is Irish on both his mother's and father's side. Donovan says, "I am Irish, you are German, but what makes us Americans? Just one thing, a one, a… the rule-book. We call it the Constitution and agree to the rules, and that's what makes us Americans".

It pains me that this distinction between institutions, made up of rules for administering interests, and cultural realities, made up of traditions, existential values, religious beliefs, literature, music and art, is still so often ignored. And not only by "sovereignists" who are powerful in the political arena and hold sway with popular audiences, but are often ill-equipped conceptually. Unfortunately, this confusion is also rampant in high places. Two examples, to bring me to my conclusion.

On October 31, 1990, the German Federal Constitutional Court – I take this example from Seyla Benhabib's excellent book, *Another Cosmopolitanism* – ruled against a law passed the previous year by the provincial assembly of Schleswig-Holstein, which allowed foreigners who had lived in Germany for at least five years to vote in local elections. The court's objection was that access to the ballot box at any level and throughout the country is conditional on the possession of citizenship, which in turn presupposes the "political community of fate to which individual citizens are bound". The state, the court then specified, should not be conceived as an institution in which only those with certain "interests" participate, but rather "the people understood as a group bound together as a unity". In other words, the state not as *demos* but as *ethnos*. Fortunately, this statement was disproved three years later at the European level, when the Maastricht Treaty established European citizenship, guaranteed to the inhabitants of all fifteen signatory States, regardless of any ethnic roots.

In this context, it is regrettable to have to recall – and here we come to the second and best known example – how much time and energy was wasted on the pointless discussion of whether the European Union had Christian roots when the Preamble to the aborted European Constitution was being drafted. This is a serious problem for historians of Europe, i.e., a historical reality whose development has obvious links with the history of religion and the Church. But it is completely inappropriate when it comes to the European Union, an institution that is supposed to define the rules for the coexistence of several nations that agree to submit to a common order. Exactly *demos*, a democratic mechanism for the management of particular interests, not *ethnos* with common roots.

To make this thought clearer, I would like to conclude with a wish: that the European Union, sooner or later, will return to the path, now interrupted, perhaps even somewhat forgotten, towards that reality which the Treaty of Maastricht should have paved the way for, without explicitly mentioning it: the United States of Europe, a reality made up of many cultures, many languages, many nations – many cultural identities – but of a single State – a single institution for managing coexistence. I am well aware that, *sic stantibus rebus*, this is just "such stuff as dreams are made on", as the Bard said. But sometimes it is worth dreaming, not to lose ourselves in vain fantasies, but to dare to imagine horizons that might one day be reached – and to work to reach them.