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Book Review

Vittorio Dini and Matthew D'Auria (eds.), *The Space of Crisis. Images and Ideas of Europe in the Age of Crisis, 1914-1945*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2013, 225 pp.

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There are many ways in which we might speak about Europe – an issue as topical as ever and, perhaps, even inflated on the mass media level. A seminal way is to start from the idea of Europe and the ways in which it was construed in delicate moments of the political, economic and cultural life of its nations. Surely the period between the beginning of the First and the end of the Second World War is one of the most interesting, at least with reference to modern European history. The volume edited by Vittorio Dini and Matthew D'Auria provides a fairly comprehensive overview of how and to what extent European high culture addressed the challenges and the threats posed to European identity. Threats that, at the time, were not always perceived as such – inasmuch as some references to Europe and to the projects of its unification responded to schemes of a radically nationalist and even imperialistic nature. This is grasped very well in the essay by Jan Vermerein on the myth of the “Reich” in German political thought. Compared to other projects that in those years were being drawn to produce a united Europe, the German conception of “Reich” was characterized by the Christian and medieval roots that it evoked, but also for the focus on Central Europe, for promoting, more or less explicitly, German leadership and, not least, by the frequent use of an irrational and emotional language. Rather different notions, always stemming from the German-speaking world, were instead those of “Paneuropa” and “Mitteleuropa”, advocated by the likes of Coudenhove-Kalergi or Prince Rohan. On this point, Vermerein’s reading partially diverges from that of Anita Prettenthaler-Ziegerhofer, who dedicates her chapter to the analysis of these two authors and their political and cultural projects. Although they considered themselves “children of modernity” [p. 175,] their theoretical and practical activity was deeply influenced by their aristocratic background and their admiration for Greek and Roman culture – especially by Prince Karl Anton Rohan. This does not mean, of course, that their scheme did not offer elements of validity. Above all, the reference to the role that culture has always played on the definition of a common identity, without which any institution is “politically inert” [p. 176,] was particularly relevant.

In the French-speaking world, as we know nationalistic surges were not absent, but they combined much less with the idea of Europe. In the early twentieth century French culture essentially reiterated the particularistic worship of the nation-state. Some, and this is the case of Paul Valéry, reflected on the possibility of surviving the crisis that Europe was going through in the aftermath of the First World War. The essay by Annamaria Ducci emphasizes the role played by the great French poet as president of the Comité Permanent des Arts and des Lettres within the Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle of the League of Nations. Similarly to Coudenhove and Rohan, Valéry expressed in those years a pedagogical and elitist vision of culture. Even Valéry was always committed to building a community of states in peaceful coexistence and cooperation. He went from a more pessimistic stand, expressed in *La Crise de l'Esprit*, to more optimistic

views, culminating in his writings of the late Thirties. The concepts of “classic” and “continuity” became for him lifelines in the face of the cultural aggression represented by nihilistic avant-gardes and new barbaric mythologies coming from the Germanic and Slavic world. Ducci points out to some inconsistencies that were not only Valéry’s, but of the whole French liberal and moderate intelligentsia – advocating universalism and still believing that the French nation was the true and only coryphaea of these universal values thanks to the legacy the 1789 Revolution.

An original contribution, worthy of special attention, is that by Zoran Milutinovic on the diagnosis of the European spiritual crisis of two important Serbian intellectuals in the inter-war period: Nikolaj Velimirović and Dimitrije Mitrinovic. The first was a theology professor and bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The second, an intellectual of many interests, leading a full civic and cultural life that brought him to create, in the early thirties, a large albeit short-lived discussion group: the New Britannia Movement. Friends with one another, both spent much of their lives between England and the United States. Both felt that the crisis of Europe could find a solution only by returning to the original source, now dried out, of Christianity, the one true center of gravity of the common identity of the Old Continent. In particular, for the pacifist Mitrinovic the Christianity he referred to had little to do with the religion of the New Testament and with ecclesiastical institutions. It indicated, rather, “a complex psychological and ethical attitude” [p. 57,] so much so that he developed a syncretistic religion, “a cosmopolitan amalgamation of ideas and images, politically ambiguous and rhetorically puzzling” [p. 65.] Yet, Velimirović came at last to a conservative and even fiercely nationalistic stand. Notwithstanding these different landings, both authors always believed that the salvation from the Apocalypse could only come from Western Europe and, more specifically, from Britain according to Mitrinovic, and from the United States for Velimirović.

And yet America seemed to be to so many European intellectuals, not only French, the real threat – if not the cause itself – of Europe’s crisis. This even before 1929. In the construction of the idea of Europe, be it peaceful and cosmopolitan or aggressive and imperialistic, the perception of the United States played a fundamental role, almost as if it were a mirror, reflecting or distorting according to the different ideological interpretations. In many cases, the negative interpretation and the denigration of the United States prevailed. All this is explained in detail in the essay by Richard Deswarte. He distinguishes between “Americanism” as the intellectual debate on the United States, and “Americanization,” the actual impact of American influence on European society, its values and its everyday lifestyles – in short, the rise of an American way of life. It is usually said that Americanization unfolded as a relentless process only from the end of World War II onwards, also because of the outcome of that conflict. Yet, Deswarte shows to what an extent this phenomenon was in full swing already in the 1920s. Many, especially among philosophers, historians and artists, denounced the advent of a “Machine Society” in European countries due to the increasing preponderance of machines and industry in all aspects of daily life. “The spirit over the matter” was a recurring expression. Most striking is that for many of these European thinkers “it was not the American federal political system that engrossed them, but rather its modern rational economy and mass consumerist society” [p. 86.]

Things were much different for a small but fierce group of Italian intellectuals, including Luigi Einaudi and Attilio Cabiati, as Annamaria Amato (who also takes into account the contribution of the industrialist Giovanni Agnelli) explains, and Carlo Rosselli, whose ideas are examined by Matthew D’Auria. Over all of these, the federal model exercised a great fascination. Some even made explicit references to the experience of American politics. Another common trait, which helps explain their pro-European federalist and anti-war views, was their anti-fascism – which, in Rosselli’s case culminated in the sacrifice of his own life. Cabiati and Agnelli were inspired directly by Wilsonian idealism – very common in Italy during the First World War, though soon to be overwhelmed by a nationalist and anti-liberal wave. If between the two world wars there were few avowedly pro-European democrats, many of those few were Italians. It is an interesting and original historiographical element that emerges from reading this book. With Rosselli, moreover, the reformist and liberal revision of socialism was accompanied and even fueled by a strong Europeanism and a stout criticism of the cult of the nation state. Rosselli’s federalism still stands out for its attention to the social dimension of politics. D’Auria stresses how socialism and federalism were both born, according to Rosselli, from the need to break the monolithic idea of sovereignty into a series of “multiple spaces” [p. 134.]

Among the many intellectuals examined in the volume, Carlo Rosselli is perhaps the one that more than others related the notions of “crisis” and “space” to the political, social and cultural developments of Europe after 1914. Such a theoretical awareness was rarely found in Europe at the time. But analogies emerge from the writings of John Dewey, on whom Adriano Vinale focuses his chapter. The American philosopher radically questioned the idea of the nation state on the grounds that, historically, many of its functions were either effete or had turned into heavy fetters to the development of a free and peaceful society. Even Dewey was trying to think of a new international order – an issue still on the table today, as pressing as ever.

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