

Rismag Gordeziani (Tbilisi)

Towards the Understanding of European Identity in Classical Athens and the Modern World

Despite the wide application of the notion 'European identity' in modern political studies, its definition admittedly remains vague (1). The main reason obviously is the lack of agreement over what is to be considered as the basic coordinating factor of this supranational unity. While the intensive process of European unity formation has been underway since the 1980s thanks to the vigorous efforts of European political leaders and the supportive institutional, political and economic frameworks, the sociological survey reveals that the number of citizens placing their European identity before national is rather insignificant and is gradually decreasing not only among the forty-seven states of the Council of Europe, but even among the twenty seven members of the European Union (2).

Now that the whole world including Europe is gripped by critical events, and disintegration is gaining more and more power in parallel with the processes of integration, it becomes especially important to define the essence of identity in general and specifically, of European identity. Admittedly, the present focus on such formal criteria of European identity as geographical location, religion, cultural and political traditions, loyalty to humanist and democratic values has proved rather unconvincing. In this regard, the maxim by the modern French journalist, philosopher and writer, Bernard-Henri Levi sounds quite attractive from the outset of 21st century: *Europe is not a place but an idea*. If we adhere to this formulation, we should identify the basic coordinating factor of European identity as a certain set of value that will adequately reflect the reality.

In this respect, it is worthwhile to consider how the question was formulated in Ancient Greece, which gave birth not only to the idea of Europe, but also to the opposition Europe/Asia, and which, naturally, could

not have known how the idea of Europe would develop in the following millennia.

As known, Europe as a geographical notion is not yet mentioned in the Homeric epics. However, Homer refers to the daughter of Phoinix (14, 321) without mentioning her name, who bore Minos and Rhadamanthus. Consequently, the arrival of mythical Europa to her eponymous continent started from Crete, while her sons were the first European rulers.

The name came to designate a geographical notion as early as the Archaic period to denote first middle Greece and later the Thracian-Macedonian east. It is not easy to say whether the geographical name was derived from the mythic name or vice versa – whether the name of a maiden kidnapped by Zeus is the consequence of the etymological expansion of the place-name.

If we share the opinion of M. P. Nilsson, a woman on a bull from a Mycenaean seal must be associated with the myth about Europa (3). This prompts some researchers to suppose that the term *Europa*, as a place-name as well as a mythic name, must have been established already in the pre-Greek world. As concerns its etymology, according to the proposed Greek and Semitic hypothesis, the term must be related either to Greek εὐρύς “expansive, broad” and ὄψ, ὀπίς “face, eye”, or to a Semitic root *ereb* meaning “sunset, evening, west”. However, these hypotheses are rejected by the authors of etymological dictionaries Frisk and Chantraine, who find its etymology either unidentified or of the pre-Greek origin (4). The author of one of the latest hypothesis is the renowned linguist, E. J. Furnée, who finds that pre-Greek languages are of the Kartvelian origin. He does not exclude either that the term in question could be of Kartvelian etymology: Kartvelian *rcoba*, containing the Georgian-Zan **wrc* root and also Georgian-Zan suffixes *-ob* and *-a* for verbal nouns, clearly correspond to the meaning of the place-name proposed by Frisk. According to him, the term must refer to the contrast the boundless continental reach could create against the confines of isles and peninsulas (e. g. Peloponnesus) washed by the sea all around. Therefore, the extensive reaches of the land were designated by the name Europa to refer to continental Greece at first and afterwards, along with the Greek colonization, to the whole continent (5). In the classical period it was already viewed as a member of the Europe/Asia opposition to designate a continent about whose eastern boundaries they did not have a clear idea (6). The core representatives of the opposition members were considered Persia in the East and Greece in the West. As early as the first half of the 5th century BC, in his reasoning over the roots and causes of the Greek-Persian opposition, Herodotus

refers to Persian historians who believed that the cause of all was, first, the abduction of Io by the Phoenicians, then the abduction of Europa, afterwards of Medea by the Hellenes and lastly, of Helen by the Trojans. "So far it was a matter of mere seizure on both sides. But after this (the Persians say), the Greeks were very much to blame; for they invaded Asia before the Persians attacked Europe" (I, 1-4). Thus, the father of history considers Greece as the principal representative of Europe. The tendency of identifying Europe with Hellas and Asia with Persia can also be found in fiction. I will cite only one example – a fragment from a 5th century BC non-surviving epic poem *Persica* reads: "Lead me to another tale, how from the land of Asia/a great war came to Europe" (Bernabe, fr. 1).

Thus Greece, which after the great colonization in the classical period established a firm hold in many Mediterranean and Black Sea regions thanks to its apoikias/colonies, i. e. the most effective disseminators of the Hellenic code, it developed an ambition to be the creator of European mentality that would become paradigmatic for others. This, first of all, was manifested in political pluralism and the diversity of political systems developed in many different poleises. The society faced the permanent necessity to choose between autocracy, oligarchy, democracy or any other hybrid form of governance. The classical period gave birth to an idea that neither political system is perfect and fully acceptable. However, here is how Plato, the greatest philosopher of the period and the critic of Athenian democracy, gives an account of his teacher's, Socrates' death. According to Plato, Socrates, wrongfully sentenced to death, nevertheless rejects the opportunity to flee from the punishment, thereby demonstrating his respect to the laws and the state judgment, which, despite his outright criticism, he credited as the best among those available (7). Socrates' behavior conveyed the following message: though democratic Athens deserves criticism, its laws, i. e. its political system is advanced over others. The most solid argument in favour of this standpoint was that the system enabled Hellas, the symbol of Europe in the ancient world, to conquer unparalleled heights in artistic culture and analytical thought, the two areas where human artistic potential is demonstrated most powerfully. The Hellenic environment became the most favorable milieu to foster the concept of democracy as a system of values, so logically and eloquently formulated in Pericles' well-known oration cited by Thucydides (II, 37). In Pericles' words we could single out 21 signs or key concepts that cover the whole essence of democracy. While it is impossible to discuss them in detail within this article (8), I will try to highlight how they respond to three cardinal questions:

a. What should a society, relying on democracy be like? According to Pericles, it should be 1. respectful of the laws it adopts and intolerant towards any threats of violating these laws; 2. strictly observant of unwritten, that is moral laws and openly critical of law-breakers; 3. emancipated and morally prepared to adhere to state interests when making a choice; 4. intrepid and prepared for self-defense when necessary; 5. indifferent to a person's material status and giving privilege to his/her integrity and experience; 6. advocate of sound reason and freedom of speech.

b. What should a person be like? According to Pericles, he/she should 1. enjoy equal rights with other citizens; 2. enjoy personal freedom; 3. be involved in state affairs; 4. be a professional and thus obtain personal freedom; 5. have his/her own opinion and be able to declare it public; 6. be educated and rich in spirit; 7. observe laws; 8. invest wealth into public benefit and welfare.

c. What should a state be like? According to Pericles, it should 1. act as the guardian of democracy; 2. be open to foreigners to share advancements and cultivate knowledge; 3. be capable of synchronizing public and personal interests; 4. acquire friends not through receiving but through giving alms; 5. be the guaranty of transparency; 6. be responsible for making the citizens' free time meaningful; 7. refrain from unjustified militarization.

This model, which was more or less successfully employed in Pericles' contemporary Athens and in fact fostered the principles of Athenian identity (9), could serve as the foundation for the concept of European identity in building the so-called European Home even in our times thanks to its universal character, lack of any religious, ethnic and geographical constraints and contribution to critical-analytical reasoning. However, this model is far more difficult to implement than any other because it requires readiness on the part of society, person and state. Being well aware of this, the authorities of the Athenian democracy were determined not to introduce the system in societies that were not duly prepared. Besides, ancient experience made obvious the following: during the implementation of the democratic model of governance, the negligence or inappropriate realization of even one of its aspects is sufficient to generate anomalies, which may often prove fatal. In this case, the democratic system, as evidenced by the Hellenic history, may become so unacceptable to the society that it may be driven towards ochlocracy, i. e. political chaos or tyranny, authoritarianism or autocracy. The discrepancy between the declared and realized forms may result in what Thucydides describes as the government of people in word, which in fact is the government of a single individual.

Despite the diversity of political systems of Greek polises, at the outset of the Asia/Europe opposition, Hellas, which can be reckoned as the principal representative of the idea of Europe in the ancient world, opted for the citizens' broad involvement in the political life and for the consideration of public opinion in state management as its founding principle.

Contrary to this, the main representative of Asia, the Persian Empire, chose a diametrically different principle based on the autocratic leader's unlimited power, minimal public involvement in the political life and the absence of public opinion, which, consequently, was impossible to consider.

As I have tried to show in my earlier publications on the Europe/Asia opposition (10), this difference is determined not by individual preferences or by the historical trend, but by the difference between the mental substrate (*weltanschauung* substrate; intellectual and cultural substrate) underlying the Persian civilization on the one hand and the Greek civilization on the other. The dominant *weltanschauung* principle followed by the former is based on mythological values, which are a priori recognized as the truth and allow for minimal changes. Contrary to this, the dominant *weltanschauung* principle chosen by the latter is based on values fostered by critical reasoning and thus open to regular upgrade.

Consequently, the numerous attempts ever since Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire, aimed at the cancellation of the Europe/Asia or West/East opposition, have hardly proved successful so far. The reason should be sought in the *weltanschauung* substrate, which is so deep and powerful that has proved to be much more difficult to overcome by the *weltanschauung* substrate than has been thought by our contemporary political authorities.

When we discuss the issues of European identity at the start of the 21st century, we can't help noticing that the concept has substantially altered even in the last 20 or 30 years. Since WWII, the world, and Europe in particular, has frequently witnessed events that invite corrections to the idea of European identity, or I would say, the phenomenon of Europeism. It suffices to look through the six basic aspects of the so-called European Political Thought set forth by the philosophers Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in 2003 – secularization, state's confidence and skepticism towards market success, realistic expectations of technical progress, welfare, low tolerance to the application of force, multilateralism within the UN (11) – which were expanded to 14 by the political scientist John McCormick in 2010 (12), to clearly understand how closely the principles of European identity have approached the Periclean democracy identity principles in many ways. The difference lies in the fact that the Periclean

scope was limited to such microstructures as ancient Greek polises or city state, while modern theories cover dozens of European states. However, the Periclean concept is far more clearly formulated and presents the political weltanschauung of democratic state more comprehensively.

NOTES:

- > (1) Cf. Muenkler H., Europa als politische Idee/Reich-Nation-Europa. Modelle politischer Ordnung, Weinheim Beltz 1996; Вайнштейн Г., Европейская идентичность возникающая реальность или фантом? www.politcom.ru/8315.html 2009.
- > (2) For statistical data, see Вайнштейн Г., op., cit.
- > (3) Nilsson M. P., Geschichte der Griechischen Religion, Bd. I, C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1955, 356, Anm. 1.
- > (4) Frisk H., Griechisches etymologisches Woerterbuch, 1-3, Heidelberg 1954-1974, 593; Chantraine P., Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque, 1-4, Paris 1968-1980, 388.
- > (5) Furnée E. J., Paleokartwelisch-pelasgische Einflüsse in den indogermanischen Sprachen, Leiden 1986, 47.
- > (6) For more details, see RE and DNP.
- > (7) Socrates' arguments are cited in detail in Plato's *Crito*.
- > (8) For more details, see Gordeziani R., For Ancient and Modern Understanding of Democracy (Mneme), dedicated to the memory of Aleksandre Aleksidze, Tbilisi 2000, 101 ff. (in Georgian).
- > (9) Gordesiani R., Die Gegenueberstellung Europa/Asien vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart, Tbilisi 1997.
- > (10) For Athenian identity, see Lape S., Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy, New York 2010.
- > (11) Habermas J., Derrida J., Nach dem Krieg. Die Wiedergeburt Europas, Frankfurter Allgemeine, 31.05.2003.
- > (12) McCormick J., Europeanism, Oxford University Press 2010.