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*Review of Franco Ferrarotti, La vocazione del Mediterraneo,
Chieti, Solfanelli, 2018*

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Abstract

Review of the book *La vocazione del Mediterraneo* [The vocation of the Mediterranean], by Franco Ferrarotti, Chieti: Edizioni Solfanelli, 2018. ISBN: 978-88-3305-028-7, pp. 119, € 10,00.

Keywords: Mediterranean, Europe, Euro-centrism, History, Future.

The importance of the Mediterranean Sea in a post-ideological European Union: this is the topic proposed by Franco Ferrarotti in his latest book *La vocazione del Mediterraneo*, a thorough and omni-comprehensive reflection on how the EU should establish a new positive role in the dynamics of a globalised world through the reaffirmation of the historical principles of the Mediterranean. From the very first pages of the book, Ferrarotti acutely affirms that the Mediterranean should rediscover its "vocation" by being a bridge between the North and the South and between the East and the West. References to Victor Hugo's studies on the "Mare Nostrum" and to Fernand Braudel's, as well as to philosopher Niccolò Macchiavelli's and politician Edward Gibbo's enrich Ferrarotti enlightening analysis: "Il Mediterraneo è il mare fra le terre che unisce popoli e culture – Ferrarotti writes – che ne garantisce la convivenza, ne esalta l'interscambio e la reciproca fecondazione" (p. 5).

Known in English as the sea "between the lands", the Mediterranean has played a major role in favouring the communication of the peoples around it throughout the centuries; as a result, it has prevented clashes between its diverse populations. Glorious and prosperous civilisations scattered all around the Mediterranean, and have formed a sound base for world civilisations from North to South, from East to West, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, from Carthage to Rome and from Alexandria to Babylon. Ferrarotti distinctly reminds us that it is not possible to imagine a history of the world

without the Egyptian, Hellenistic, Roman and Ottoman civilisations. He recounts diachronically the history of the Mediterranean Sea, and analyses - not without criticism - the role that the Mediterranean Sea played in the affirmation of a Euro-centric conception of the world. This Euro-centric conception combines the effects of the Scientific Revolution, the Commercial Revolution, the rise of colonial empires, the Industrial Revolution and a Second European colonization wave: Ferrarotti wisely states that no other such basin exists. The impulse that emerges from Ferrarotti's book is that nowadays the Mediterranean needs to be seen as a simulacrum of "relational plurality, based on exchange and reciprocity" (p. 17), in which intercultural communication plays a central role in allowing diverse cultures to interact on the same basis. According to Ferrarotti - and this is one of the most astonishing aspects of the book - we must move from asymmetric relations between cultures and individuals to a synchronous coexistence of people at a global level,

Si richiede oggi un tipo diverso di cultura, una cultura che sappia riesprimere i criteri di eccellenza e i termini dell'autovalutazione critica in una società di massa e in un mondo caratterizzato non più dal processo storico diacronico, bensì dalla compresenza sincronica di tutti gli esseri umani su scala planetaria (p. 21).

The crisis of global ideologies and the consequent collapse of the historical contrast between East and West, is reigniting the dialectic between the North and South divide. In this regard, the Mediterranean must rediscover its vocation of being a "zip" between the North-Atlantic region (Europe, U.S and Canada) on one side, and the African-Asian countries and Latin America on the other: "É una grande sfida, in cui gli uomini e le donne dei Paesi bagnati dal Mediterraneo potranno, ancora una volta, dare la misura piena della loro statura storica e della loro maturità cultura" (p. 20).

Ferrarotti affirms that there is no doubt that the region of the Mediterranean Sea constitutes one of the priority areas for the EU in terms of policy, political measures, cooperation and security. For instance, the region is characterised by numerous actual and potential flash points for conflicts and crisis. These may have large transnational implications because they affect the stability and resilience of many States. Taking into account this concept of trans-nationalism, Ferrarotti acutely claims that we

need to redefine the conceptual categories with which we have interpreted the social processes so far. Sociological concepts and interpretative categories like “center”, “periphery”, “local”, “global” and others need to be readdressed and reformulated. Also there is a need to observe, study and analyze the actual flow of the real social processes as they are today. We live in a a-centred world, without traditional centres capable of realising and addressing the problems and challenges of people. According to Ferrarotti, neither politics nor politicians or society and intellectuals have been able to grasp the new dimensions of reality. The “bureaucrats” of the EU, for example, are too busy and concerned with resolving budget surpluses to deal with the real and daily problems of EU citizens.

What is missing, according to Ferrarotti, is the initial spirit of the “European Dream”. This is due to an underestimation of history and to the marginalisation of the role of the European Dream. People do not study history, Ferrarotti acknowledges. Without history, without the understanding of the historical plot and its development over space and time, it is not possible to be aware of the present. “History as historical life”(p.59), Ferrarotti claims: “Senza la memoria storica, un individuo, come del resto un intero Paese o una compagine di Paesi e tutta una cultura sono completamente disorientate” (p. 59). Starting from the vocation of the Mediterranean Sea and reaffirming the role that the Mediterranean has played for centuries, it is possible to rediscover a potential common European consciousness. The Mediterranean culture unites different ethnic groups and languages, unites diverse peoples in a common destiny, and has the potential to play a central role in “actualizing the glorious past of the Continent” (p.68). To Ferrarotti, the vocation of the Mediterranean can contribute to the creation of a functioning conglomeration of nation-states.

Europe was a magnificent undertaking in its early incarnation, a “dynamic propulsive force” (p.61). Its construction allowed for the revitalisation of national cultures in the spirit of European cosmopolitanism, disappearing borders, common institutions and shared prosperity. Despite the diversity in languages and culture, European States began to pull together, in peace and ostensible harmony. Ferrarotti firmly warns the European Union against its arrogance and Euro-centrism: “La storia d’Europa non è la storia universale. L’Europa non è tutto il mondo. La boria dell’euro-centrismo è solo polvere e acceca” (p.63).

Ferrarotti reasonably argues that European politicians, European commissioners and European intellectuals are not able to address the fast-changing societal dynamic because they are not aware of them. Meanwhile, Europeans everywhere, from Stockholm to Lisbon, from Dublin to Budapest, from Rome to Crete, are feeling let down by EU institutions. Many are attracted by the idea of tearing up the EU. Ferrarotti is very critical of those who intend to leave Europe. To him, Europe, despite being a “headless democracy” (p.102) is the only possible scenario to survive in a globalised, hyper-connected and post-ideological world. Ferrarotti’s analysis of the present is acute and its vision of the future is forward-looking. Ferrarotti is conscious that the EU as it is today does not function properly: “La struttura dell’Europa odierna è burocratizzata (...) Abbiamo un’Europa che non rappresenta gli Stati, che non costituisce gli Stati Uniti d’Europa perché priva di un esercito comune, di un potere politico centrale e di un orientamento comune” (p.100). He argues that the EU as a conglomeration of nation-states is not able to handle current geo-political challenges and is incapable of addressing the demands of its citizens. Nation-states are experiencing an unprecedented crisis due to the diminishing of common actions and to the lack of common roots. It is true that in the globalised and hyper-connected world we live in, common action should be simpler and more immediate thanks to the technological means of communication, but the dominance and pervasiveness of communication has paradoxically “dried up”(p. 69) our society.

Being an acute observer and a profound connoisseur of society, in his last book, once again, Ferrarotti originally illuminates the social dynamics of current times. Millennials’ generation is growing up with mass media, with TV, with computers, with the internet. We can communicate quickly and immediately, but the “stupidity” (p. 77) of the internet and the computer lies in their stunning speed, which fails to allow people to stop, think, to pause and to reflect. The analysis of Ferrarotti is extraordinarily accurate: “Ci stiamo avviando verso un futuro con un popolo di informatissimi idioti, se è vera la definizione dell’idiotia come di colui che tutto sa ma niente capisce”, says Ferrarotti critically (p. 79). The society of communication and information we are living in does not inform and does not communicate, but it deforms and nullifies. To Ferrarotti, the EU does not inform and does not communicate as it should, therefore European

citizens have a deformed and void vision of reality. Reality, that includes the basis of human experience, has failed.

Starting from the past glories of the Mediterranean and its vocation, the EU must rediscover the human experience of its citizens. Ferrarotti predictively argues that we must rebuild Europe on the founding values of the fathers of Europe: access to all and excess to none. The EU, which owes its origins to the experience of the Mediterranean, is being a pioneer in the new scenario of a conglomeration of different nation-states. Diversity is the wealth of Europe. "United in diversity" is the motto of the EU. Europe should find the common denominator to deal with its diversity.

In this book, Franco Ferrarotti proves, once again, to be a great anticipator of our time, a lucid and far-sighted mind that is able to look beyond the contingent and to trace the paths of the future-being. Ferrarotti reconstructs the vocation of the Mediterranean in an extraordinary and suggestive vision of Europe and of the world: "Un pianeta unitario ma legato profondamente alle proprie radici. In una parola, vuol dire riuscire ad essere abitanti del villaggio e cittadini del mondo".