

Nationalism, bellicose atmosphere, struggling for true democracy: more than ever, Altiero Spinelli's teachings remain on the agenda

Nearly three quarters of a century after Altiero Spinelli drafted his Ventotene Manifesto, Europe is again facing a crisis that, by several aspects, already reminds us of the atmosphere of the pre-war and war dark times he got through.

Since the post-war years, Altiero Spinelli's thinking has thus undoubtedly been – and remains – the most inspiring, and strengthening set of concepts and guidelines for all those who strive for a strong, confident, though peaceful Europe.

Following, until he passed away in 1986, he acted with perseverance to help channel Europe towards a sustainable system of institutions, capable of supporting peaceful goals.

Two aspects are particularly worth recalling nowadays:

1. The recrudescence of nationalism makes war no longer a virtual nightmare
2. Lack of decisiveness: a congenital disability of democracy?

1. *Recrudescence of nationalism makes war no longer a virtual nightmare*

Wars – rather war in general – are an abomination. However, only a few years ago, war had gradually become in many minds a more or less obsolete and virtual concept. While people were nevertheless shown images of gunfires, bloody corpses or wounded persons, they were watching them with the vague feeling that they belonged to horror movies, or to a world of horrific fairy tales. Now that similar scenes happen close to their doorstep, the public sensitiveness seems to have a bit waken up.

At the same time, however, people both express a sincere compassion, which increasingly translates into concrete welcome attitudes, and they keep blind to the in-depth mechanisms that inevitably lead to nationalistic competition, and war. For disciples of Altiero Spinelli, this is incomprehensible, and unacceptable.

Indeed, at the times when Altiero Spinelli developed his generous and inspired, though lucid and realistic, strong thinking, later to be consolidated as a complete doctrine, war was omnipresent, and its nationalistic ascent was an evidence. Fascism had been spreading throughout Europe for over a decade, with its endless procession of persecutions, before the pan-European – and beyond – war burst out.

Compassion is too little if one does not seek to kill the evil at its very root. Even if the same principle apply worldwide to any similar situations, let us limit here our topic to the European scene, mainly because the proper levers are indeed – or should be – at hand. Let us start by tackling the relationship with our close, and familiar neighbours.

When Altiero Spinelli addresses the Crisis of Modern Civilisation in the Ventotene Manifesto, in particular the upsurge of “Nation States”, his analysis of the process that, in the then recent past, led to a bellicose situation is without appeal. He definitely links the apparently positive building up of (independent) Nation States to growing aggressiveness, imperialism, and war.

“Every people, defined by its ethnic, geographical, linguistic and historical characteristics, was expected to find the instrument best suited to its needs within a State organisation created according to its own specific concept of political life, and with no outside intervention.” (i.e. the underlying expectations behind the establishment of Nation States.)

“The ideology of national independence was a powerful stimulus to progress. It helped overcome narrow-minded parochialism and created a much wider feeling of solidarity against foreign oppression.” (i.e. the feeling of belonging to a new, larger group, as opposed to smaller communities, fosters a sense of greater strength, and security.)

“It eliminated many obstacles hindering the free movement of people and goods. Within the territory of each new State, it brought the institutions of the more advanced societies to more backwards ones.” (i.e.

together with a greater openness, belonging to a larger group brings the positive benefits of economic, political, and social progress.)

“But with this ideology came the seeds of capitalist imperialism, which our own generation has seen mushroom to the point where totalitarian States have grown up, and the world wars have been unleashed.” (i.e. bigger, and wealthiest groups will inherently drift towards capitalist imperialism, and war; this suggests (1) that the aspiration to economic development may bring serious social and political side effects, and (2) that there is a need to tap the natural trends of capitalism that, perhaps inherently, lead to imperialism, by introducing regulatory mechanisms, under strict democratic control.)

Incidentally, those currently who carelessly promote the *“Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership”* in a nearly complete opacity make fun of democracy, and deliberately fool the peoples.

2. *Lack of decisiveness: a congenital disability of democracy?*

Altiero Spinelli stresses that the reorganisation of Europe in the aftermath of World War II will be under pressure by the US and the Britons to restore the previous order of Nation States. Actually those two countries were not alone with this lack of vision. Of course, the eventually defeated countries, particularly Germany, as well as Austria, were in need of a complete overhaul of their constitutional dispositions. But a country like France, for instance, saw relatively little changes in this respect, and its overvalued status of co-winner formed the basis for a renewed claim for grandeur, and – temporarily – imperialism, still.

Spinelli was thus conscious that Europe’s overall organisation would not be automatically revamped, and that it should definitely be processed voluntarily. Balanced supranational institutions, smartly articulated according to well established constitutional principles, may have been granted to defeated Germany (in fact, to its Western part first). But, in spite of Spinelli’s efforts – noticeably with the 1984 Constitutional project –, it is still pending for the overarching European entity.

Instead, we have the European Council, an incredible body where nationalistic attitudes, backed by a persistent electoral preoccupation, and petty political and partisan schemes, slow down – and often even block – all suggestions, or moves attempting to significantly reform the European institutions to introduce a balanced democratic representation both of the peoples, and of the Member States.

This obviously considerably worsens still the indisputable, and seemingly inherent weakness of democracies when faced to authoritarian leaders of autocratic regimes, a feature that Spinelli strikingly points out.

“At the very moment” he writes *“when the greatest decisiveness and boldness is needed, democrats lose their way, not having the backing of spontaneous popular approval, but rather a gloomy tumult of passions. They think it their duty to form a consensus, and they represent themselves as exhortatory preachers where instead there is a need for leaders who know just what they want. They miss chances favourable to the consolidation of a new regime by attempting to make bodies, which longer preparation and which are more suited to periods of relative tranquillity, work immediately. They give their adversaries the weapons they need to overthrow them. In their thousand tendencies, they do not represent a will for renewal, but vain and very confused ambitions found in minds that, by becoming paralysed, actually prepare the terrain for the growth of reaction. Democratic political methods are a dead weight during revolutionary crises.”* He adds *“... the democrats wear down their initial popularity as asserters of freedom by their endless polemic...”*

Those two examples prove, if necessary, that the lessons of the past have not yet borne their fruits. Indeed, Altiero Spinelli’s thinking is still topical, and it is unfortunately likely to remain so for quite a time. It is our duty to restlessly disseminate it.