

Etienne François : Laudatory speech for Luisa Passerini

Speech held on the occasion of the award ceremony for the All European Academies Madame de Staël prize for cultural values 2014

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Dear President Barroso, dear colleagues and friends, cara Luisa,

First of all, I would like to say how happy I am to have the honour to deliver the laudatio for Professor Luisa Passerini, the first laureate of the All European Academies Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values, a prize « awarded biennially to eminent scholars whose work represents a significant contribution to the cultural and intellectual values of Europe and to the idea of European integration » and is co-sponsored by the Mercator Foundation. This laudatio gives me in fact an extraordinary possibility to express « coram publico » our admiration, our gratitude and also my friendship to Luisa Passerini.

As you can see, subjectivity and emotion are at the beginning of my laudatio. Why? Certainly because of my old complicity with Luisa Passerini – the first time we met was a congress in Paris in spring 1992 (more than twenty years ago!) in honour of the late french historian François Bédarida, the first director of the new founded « Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent » and since this time due to our common passion for cultural history, European history and memory we have had many occasions of working together. But the main reason for my beginning with subjectivity lies in the fact that Luisa Passerini is one of the first historians to have underlined the necessity to take into account subjectivity as an essential category of historical research, not at all in the sense of a dangerous relativism, but much more in order to contribute to a better intelligibility of past and present.

You can certainly hear at my strong foreign accent that I have been living and working in Germany for a long time. Nevertheless, I didn’t forget the rhetoric skills of the french school of my youth. And, therefore, I will try to summarise in three points the reasons which justified and explained the choice of Luisa Passerini as first laureate of the All European Academies Prize for Cultural Values.

The first point to be underlined is the excellence and above all the originality of Luisa Passerini’s academic career. It is, in fact, totally opposite to that of a « normal » scholar, who follows a one-way classical path. Her career has not at all been a linear one. It is much more a way made of liberty and imagination, of experimentation and internationality, of dialogue and discovery; a way in which personal contacts and political action were as important as the research in archives and libraries. In other terms : the opposite of the life of a « Schreibtischtäter ».

After her Maturita Classica in the Liceo Classico in Asti (the city where she was born, also the city where she had Paolo Conte as schoolfriend), in 1960 she spent one year in the United States, in a Highschool at Rochester. Back in Italy, she studied Philosophy and History at the University in Turin where she achieved her Ph. D. in Philosophy (about Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte). But in the same time she was also politically active and that is why she went after her Ph.D. to Mozambique and spent some time in Dar es Salaam, working with and on the Mozambique liberation movement (Frelimo). Back in Italy, she took an active part in the events of 1968, participating in workers' education groups and in left discussion groups which involved the study and analysis of capitalism in a world context. During these years, from 1969 until 1989, she worked either as a teacher in highschools or as teaching collaborator at the University of Turin. 1989 marked the beginning of an international career bringing her as a visiting professor or as a research fellow to Australia, (Sydney), Paris (E.H.E.S.S.), New-York (New School of Social Research, New York University, Columbia University), Essen (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut) and Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg). In 1994 she became Professor of Contemporary History at the European University Institute in Florence and was there until 2002. From 2004 to 2011 she was finally Professor of Cultural History in Turin. She is now theoretically retired but always part-time Professor at the European University Institute and since 2008 visiting professor at Columbia University in the Oral History MA Program.

The second aspect that I want to stress is the outstanding quality of her work and the importance of her contributions to history, the humanities and the social sciences. Her selected bibliography contains more than ten important books published between the beginning of the eighties until now. These books dealt with a great variety of issues like « The Fascism in Popular Memory of the Turin Working Class », « Mussolini immaginario », « The Autobiography of the Generation of 1968 in Italy », « Imagination and Politics in Britain between the Wars », « The myth of Europe », « Memory and Utopia », or « Love and the Idea of Europe ». The majority of them were written and published at first in Italian, but some others were written directly in English. More important: nearly all of her books were later translated into foreign languages. Luisa Passerini has in fact the same fluidity and elegance of language in Italian, English and French, and unlike the French poet Mallarmé who once wrote: „Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs“, she sees in the plurality of languages a constitutive dimension of European creativity and identity, a great chance for all of us and the best protection against the danger of uniformisation and uniformity. Among her contributions to the humanities and the social sciences, I would like to mention three points : firstly, her attention to the subjectivity and the intersubjectivity, to the link between public and private, but also to the discontinuity between the public sphere and the private sphere, despite all the bridges that lay and must be laid down between the two. Secondly, her ability to question and subvert the false hierarchies like any kind of rigid and unalterable dichotomy – either in the relationship between men and women or in the relationship between different memories: from this point of view I like her concept of memories as „shareable memories » very much. Thirdly, the openness of her historical meaning : the

majority of her books deal with the history of the 20th century; but this without exclusivity. Beside the short temporality of the history of our present, she takes also into account the « longue durée » of cultural structures and representations, as one can see for example in her very stimulating book « Il mito d'Europa. Radici antiche per nuovi simboli » (Florence, 2002).

My third point deals with the central place of Europe and Europeanness in the life and work of Luisa Passerini. All her research projects since the beginning of the eighties focus on European issues, either by the means of a comparative approach (like the research projects about car workers in Coventry and Turin or about social structures and collective representations in four communities in France and Italy), or by the means of a genuine European topic, like the projects « les identités européennes », « Gender relationships in Europe at the turn of the millennium », « Europe, emotions, politics and identities » or finally « Images of Europe 1989-2004 : The construction of European identity through the cinema ». All these projects have been conducted on the basis of European networks in collaboration with students and scholars from Europe and outside, like Philippe Joutard or Hartmut Kaelble. In all these projects one can find the same characteristics: a historical and analytical approach instead of an ideological or teleological one; the conviction that Europe can be better understood from its margins than from what is considered its centre, from the point of view and the perspective of the dominated and not of the dominant, from outside than from the inside. Therefore her critique of the Eurocentrism, that implicitly means « that Europeans had invented a certain type of loving relationship, mainly heterosexual and exclusive to Western civilisation, defined by its contrast and supposed superiority to the culture of other continents »; therefore her attempt to take into account the limits of Europeanness; therefore finally her refusal to accept a single root and a linear course, whether from antiquity, the Middle Ages or the modern time, to the concept of Europe and Europeanness.

I am very happy that the prize has been placed under the patronage of Germaine de Staël. She was in fact an extraordinary person, a totally free woman who built her life without being limited by the prejudices of the time; she was a great writer and a passionate lover, one of the greatest political philosophers in the time of the French Revolution (similar from this point of view to Hannah Arendt in the last century) and also a woman with an eminent political influence; a woman of the Enlightenment who also identified herself with the ideas and values of the Romanticism; she was the only woman Napoleon was afraid of, but also one of the very few women who were able to intimidate Goethe; she was at least a woman travelling all her life through the whole of Europe, feeling at home in France as in Switzerland, in Italy, Germany, Austria, England, Sweden or Russia, always eager to discover new persons, new countries, new cultures, always anxious to share the result of her reflexions and discoveries with her readers and her very extended and true European networks.

I am also very happy that this Prize is given in a time when we are memorising another great European historian who had so many aspects in common with Luisa Passerini, Jacques Le Goff. For both, the values are constitutive for the European identity and at the heart of the European project. Both actually have taught us that despite the worrying result of the elections in Hungary we have to trust in openness and generosity.

It is, at least for me and certainly also for all of us, a very encouraging sign, that the All European Academies Prize for Cultural Values is awarded to Luisa Passerini in this year when the majority of European countries – in and outside of the EU – like many other countries throughout the whole world is remembering the downfall of our sleepwalking continent in a suicidal war hundred years ago and thinking about it as one of the biggest failures of European values performed precisely in the name of these values. In this dark context all of the work and life of Luisa Paserini reminds us that Europe could and should also be seen as a continent of love.

Carissima Luisa, congratulazioni per quel prezzo que tu hai cosi eminente meritata. Mille grazie per tutto che tu ci ha apreso et apportata. Grazie finalmente per la fortuna et felicità che io ho a avere encontrar ti e di avere la possibilità di lavorare con tè.