
Graglia (Uni. Milan): the future of nations is Europe, not sovereigntism

An ambitious national project envisages the redevelopment of the former Bourbon-era prison and the cultural and educational promotion of the islands of Ventotene and Santo Stefano, with a special focus on the younger generations, within a European dimension. The project falls under the responsibility of Government Commissioner, former MEP, Silvia Costa. What is the historical and political import of these two islands today? What is their message to 21st century Italian society? SIR broached the subject with **Piero Graglia**, Professor of History of European Integration and History of Regional Integration at the University of Milan.



Immagine non disponibile

They symbolize two places of misery and oppression. Santo Stefano was constructed by the Bourbon rulers as a place of detention for political opponents and potentially dangerous common criminals. The island of Ventotene, one nautical mile from Santo Stefano, is steeped in history as a place of confinement since Octavian Augustus banished there his daughter Julia the Elder, deemed politically and publicly harmful. Centuries later, under Fascist Italy, the islands Ustica, Lipari, Tremiti, Ponza and Ventotene served as prison camps for those deemed to be most threatening opponents. The only island that continued serving that purpose was Ventotene, as all other internment colonies were abandoned, chiefly due to the protests of the local population. The population of Ventotene was too small to have significant "political" impact, and thus endured the sad fate of an open-air prison. The so-called "system" of the two islands of Ventotene and Santo Stefano is both evidence of the abomination of political imprisonment and confinement and a historical record to be protected by all means. To this end, three years ago we created, in collaboration with and supported by the Municipality of Ventotene, a "Centre for Research and Documentation on Political Detention and Confinement" whose purpose - with the contribution of the University of Milan and other Italian and European universities - is to study the history of this unique reality in Italy and to preserve its archival heritage with an initiative launched in 2016. Europe, a self-defined area of freedom, security and justice, is expected to regard Ventotene and Santo Stefano through the same lens as other places of sorrowful remembrance across the continent. Unfortunately, remembrance is never a static process. It implies passions, experiences, awareness, and frequently prompts questions about our historical past that need to be answered. **The foundations of the European federalist movement were laid in Ventotene. How was it born and what happened thereafter?** The European federalist concept was not conceived in Ventotene by chance. When Fascism confined its most eminent opponents on the island, it became a huge political workshop, a place of intellectual reflection and study. Those involved in the discussions that led to the Ventotene Manifesto can be counted on the fingers of one hand: *First and foremost, Ernesto Rossi, probably the architect of the document together with Altiero Spinelli, born in 1907 and 10 years younger than Rossi; along with socialist philosopher Eugenio Colson and his wife Ursula Hirschmann who had extensive political experience as an anti-Nazi emigrant, in France since 1934. While only Rossi and Spinelli drafted the document, it was the result of heated discussions amongst all four, with the involvement of other prisoners. The two drafters*

drew on ideas contained in the early writings of Luigi Einaudi, who had criticised Wilson's project of the League of Nations in 1918, proposing that it be replaced by a European Federation. Most importantly, they read a large corpus of literature produced in Britain in the 1930s (the Federal Union group comprising Lionel Robbins, Lord Beveridge, Lord Lothian and others), which advocated the idea of a United States of Europe as the sole viable response to protracted European conflicts. The visionary yet far-sighted document that emerged from these discussions offered Europeans a choice: either a European federation or new wars, thus erecting a new distinction between progressives and conservatives on the basis of whether or not they adhered to the federalist vision. **What happened thereafter?** The document spread from the island to the continent between 1941 and 1943 and became the subject of intense debate among anti-fascist political groups in Italy, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. However, Europeanism is by no means the same as federalism: federalism is a specific political project, institutionally defined and planned; Europeanism is a feeling. *The federalists deserve credit for inspiring 1950s moderate leaders to give meaning and value to their pro-European vision*, be it the cosmopolitanism of De Gasperi, or the pacifying Europeanism of Robert Schuman with regard to Germany, or the Europeanism of Adenauer, regarded as the only way for Germany to recover from the severe responsibilities of the armed conflict. That is why the Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950, a unique occurrence in the founding documents of the first Communities, makes explicit reference to the need for a European Federation, although this point eventually disappeared from the rhetoric of pro-European governments.



Immagine non disponibile

The fact that the notion of a "European Federation" is no longer found in the governing Europeanist world doesn't mean that it should be discarded and replaced with... what? A United States of Europe that could arise from the historical experience of the European Union - a unique experience of cooperation and collaboration that, based on economic reconstruction, eventually extended to comprise other political and institutional domains - is not the daydream of some philosopher, like Kant in 1700. Rather, it represents the necessary vision of "European" society and culture that cannot afford the risk of sliding back into nationalisation and permanent separation of its customs and behavioural patterns. You cannot be a nationalist (or, according to the popular term - which did not exist in the Italian language five years ago - sovereignist) and pro-European at the same time. The idea of a Europe closed in its national egoisms ("Italians first", the "great France", the "global Britain") cannot be pursued whilst fostering supranational integration models. Most importantly, it should be made clear - and politics has yet to fully develop this awareness - that supranational integration is by no means the death of the nation. **Can you elaborate?** What I mean is that national identity is not something confined within a structure we call State, nor is a sovereign State the natural evolution of a feeling of national belonging. In other words, one can remain Italian, French, German or Spanish even if certain national functions and powers are taken over in a democratic and shared manner by a supranational body. *We are privileged because this body already exists and it reposes on the cornerstone of a concrete historical experience that the "sovereignist groups" pretend not to see:* Its name is European Union, and it could have more tasks and competences if only the

advocates of the "Europe of nations" agreed to increase its competences in areas that Member States can no longer manage individually. Whenever the EU is criticised for not doing its part in the area of migration, or of not taking action in the field of preventive medicine, we should remember that those criticising are often the very ones who prevented the EU from taking on these competences in the name of the sanctity of a so-called "sovereign nation-state." We should ask Orban whether he really believes that Hungary, the largest European nation in its own definition, would be such if it were isolated and deprived of the bountiful economic aid and subsidies it receives from all other European nations through the EU system. **The Pontine island is the site of ongoing activities and there is talk of a "Campus of Europe" project. Do you consider it a good "investment"?** Given that my job is that of a researcher and university professor, I would be contradicting myself if I said that a facility for young researchers and scholars - from any country - is not a good investment. This is obviously no guarantee of the quality of the research carried out, as it the latter is normally evaluated by other means, but Ventotene and Santo Stefano have a distinctive intrinsic charisma. I would like to take a personal experience as an example, if I may. **Please do.** When I was writing the biography of Altiero Spinelli, which took me about 12 years to complete, I spent three months on the island of Ventotene to write the chapter on the fascist confinement and the genesis of the Manifesto. I decided not to stay there in the summer months, the busiest months, but rather in the autumn and winter months, from October to December, to explore the island's fragrances, sounds and silences. The reason I am saying this is that research work is not just about structures, desks, computers and archives, it also requires calm, tranquillity and inspiration. I do believe that Government Commissioner Silvia Costa, who is attentively and conscientiously overseeing the project for the redevelopment of the Santo Stefano and Ventotene complex, has grasped this fundamental aspect, and is pursuing the project with seriousness and dedication. Clearly, when it comes to the methods for managing a prospective project of this kind, the scope of the subject broadens with the involvement of other agencies charged with working alongside the government commissioner. But I think that this time the Italian government has initiated a valid project that may well become a good investment for Italian and European culture, and for all those concerned with preserving historical memory, not only nationally but also on a continental scale.

Gianni Borsa