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# The role of the "other" in Jacques Derrida's perception of the European identity

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## Abstract:

The deconstruction of Jacques Derrida and his concept of "différance" seems to me particularly appropriated for a thorough examination of Europe and Europeaness exposed to plural observers. Derrida considered himself a real European because of his double internal and external appartenance to Europe. He considered himself to be a European insider because he came from outside. He wrote in this context:

"I feel, European in *every part*, that is, European through and through. By which I mean, by which I wish to say, or *must* say: I do not want to be and must not to be European through and through, European *in every part*. Being a part, belonging as 'fully a part,' should be incompatible with belonging in 'every part.' "

Derrida deals with the question of Europeaness in his two writings "The other heading" (*L'autre cap*) and "Call it a day for democracy" (*La démocratie ajournée*) written in 1990 in time of entire political uncertainty in Europe shortly after the fall of the wall in Berlin. I feel important to re-consider those Derrida texts again, more than twenty years after, when Europe seems to fall again into "uncertainty", at this stage more economical than political. Derrida's suggestions about Europe's "headings" in the world, about its universalisms and particularisms and about the importance of what he calls "ideal capital" for the wellbeing of Europe are of surprising actuality. In my lecture I will pay special attention to Derrida's definitions of "European duty not only to integrate (foreigners), but also to recognize and accept their alterity" and to the task of "outsiders" for ceaseless adjustments of European cultural challenges. I will in this context refer to my book "Notre culture européenne, cette inconnue" and mention the "internal" and "external" components of the European cultural identity.

## Five keywords:

The "other", European cultural identity, Sephardic-Jewish-Algerian origins of Jacques Derrida, Post-Yalta Europe, Secrets of European Responsibility

## Paper:

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), one of the most important philosophers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, had a deep and entirely original vision of Europe and of European identity. His approach of the "deconstruction" and of the "différance" will serve as theoretical and methodological guidance for this paper. Derrida wrote and spoke about Europe and Europeanism in several writings, lectures and interviews, but most thoroughly he expressed his views in his book *L'autre cap* translated and published in English under the title *The other heading*. This book, is composed of two long essays "The other heading: memories, responses and responsibilities" and "Call it a day for democracy" which were written in 1990, shortly after the fall of the wall of Berlin and collapse of the communists regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, when a great uncertainty reigned about the future of the old continent. I feel it is important to re-consider those Derrida texts, more than twenty years after, when once again the "uncertainty" seems to regain comeback in Europe, at this stage more economical than political.

It is not by chance that Derrida choose for the title of his book about Europe, *The other heading*. The word, the term, the expression "the other" is in Jacques Derrida's opinion the right key for perception of the European identity. In his work it received a specific derridian meaning and importance like "grammatology, dissemination, trace, logocentrism, pharmakon". Mustapha Chérif opens his book entitled *Islam and the West, a conversation with Jacques Derrida* with a dedication "to all those who unconditionally welcome, listen to and respect THE OTHER." (Chérif 2008, V) And he also writes:

"How can we forget Jacques Derrida!..Through his way of questioning, he brought to life our communion, the *mu'àchara*, with the West, and prevented the despair of the other". (Chérif 2008, 103)

Derrida's interrelation with "the other" is something completely different from the politically correct respect of the "else"; it is not only a lawfully tolerated appearance of "the other" somewhere near me, but a mutual enriching, even if not unproblematic, cohabitation. For Derrida the "other" becomes "real" only by deconstruction of the binary polar opposition between the subordinated "other" (*autre*) and the superior "our" (*notre*). In traditional western Aristotelian thinking a non identical entity must be completely "other"; the deconstruction permits us to see that the "other" who is of course different from us, but who is also, like us, a non monolithic, multiplural being, and therefore – according to Derrida – not identical with himself, cannot be completely alienated from us, as he cannot be completely familiar with himself. Derrida insists that if I cannot perceive "the other" I cannot know who I am. The deconstruction of "the other" has far-reaching practical consequences and repercussions, particularly in the political sphere. Mustapha Chérif for instance shows that when we consider the existing difference between the West and Islam as a logocentric opposition of two entirely alien entities, we come inevitably to Samuel P. Huntington "clash of the civilizations" thesis. But when we conceive that the otherness of Islam and The West is a "différance" and that these two non identical civilizations have the same monotheistic roots and the common father Abraham, we can also understand that the "other" is not necessarily unapproachable and irreconcilable.

The deconstruction and the "différance" permitted Derrida also to grasp the elusive identity of Europe. His book *The Other Heading* starts with ascertainment of "two axioms" about Europe. These axioms are at the same time *aporia*, eleatic paradoxes. The first *axiom of finitude* stipulates

despite the anachronistic, and partially true, stereotype of the tired, old Europe "we are younger than ever, we Europeans, since a certain Europe does not yet exist." (Derrida 1992, 7) Since a common European entity never existed, at least not since the times of the Roman and Charlemagne Empires, Derrida sees in contemporary Europe's "pre-adult" stage, an opportunity and a space of liberty. Not attached yet to any shore, every heading can join Europe. For Derrida everybody can *potentially* become a European. This leads him to his second axiom. According to him "what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself" (Derrida 1992, 9), Europe may "take form of a subject only in the non identity to itself or, if you prefer, only in the difference with itself (avec soi)". (Derrida 1992, 9) For Derrida, the universalism of Europe is precisely the openness and the readiness to include every particular identity. Derrida argues that Europe is "notre et autre cap" "the ours and the other heading"; it means in the context of deconstruction that "the European identity is no less defined by what is non-european than by itself." (Derrida 1992, 17) To put it otherwise: I am "the other", therefore I am European.

These axioms of Europe's "otherness" and "ours-ness" are not only Derrida's general and universal conclusions, but also his subjective presumptions resulting from his familiar and personal background. The ways by which the "other" becomes European and the European modifies his own identity are unpredictable and unforeseeable. As Derrida once told: "The other, the arrival of the other is always incalculable". (Derrida and Rudinco 2004, 58) The roots of Derrida himself are far from being European: his maternal and paternal Sephardic Jewish ancestors lived during centuries in the Muslim-Arab-Ottoman Algeria and it is only "thanks" to the French colonization of this country started in 1830 and particularly to the decree of Adolph Crémieux in 1870, by which for reasons of political interests was conceded the French citizenship to most Jews in Algeria, among them Derrida's family. French authorities, guided by the principle *Divide et Impera*, did not grant the citizenship to the Muslims in Algeria. Nonetheless when in 1940 Algeria became a territory of Vichy collaborationist regime, Jews of Algeria, among them the young boy Jacques Derrida, were once again denied French citizenship. Derrida himself described his identity as of

"an Algerian, who became French at a given moment, lost his French citizenship, and then recovered it (Chérif 2008, IX, cf. also Derrida 1992, 7 and Derrida 1996, 16)."

The French secular, republican, national consciousness of 19th century was similar to the contemporary (pre)concept of the European identity. Everybody, no matter where he came from, could theoretically become a French citizen, if he declaratively supported the French revolution or the secular principles of the French Republic. On the other hand the old French Aristocracy, accused of hostility to revolutionary ideals, could lose its citizenship. French nationalism, at least until the Dreyfus affair and Maurice Barrès "enracinement", was different from the ethnic, "völkisch", emotional, romantic, inspired by the dream of national liberation and unity feelings which characterized nations in Central Europe. In this context Derrida perceived the difficulty to define the European identity, but for him, more than an obstacle, it is a real challenge.

"Taking a few shortcuts, economizing on mediations, it would seem that European cultural identity, like identity or identification in general, if it must be equal *to itself and to the other*, up to the measure of its own immeasurable difference "with itself," belongs, therefore must belong, to this *experience and experiment of the impossible*. Nevertheless, one will always be able *de jure* to ask what an ethics or a politics that measures responsibility only by the rule of the impossible can be..." (Derrida 1992, 45)

As an experience of the "impossible" could be defined also the tectonic social transformations in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 90<sup>th</sup> of the last and past century, when Derrida wrote *The other heading*. It is in my opinion a sign of wisdom, that at this particular time, Derrida did not dare or did not want to speculate about the exact future political arrangements in the post-Yalta Europe. But he was more than anybody conscious of the unprecedented importance and impact of the changes in "Eastern Europe" upon the, let's say, "Western European cultural identity". Derrida wrote:

"A moment ago, I alluded to the tremor that is shaking what are called Central and Western Europe under the very problematic names *perestroika*, *democratization*, *reunification*, entry into the *market economy*, access to political and economic liberalisms. This earthquake, which by definition knows no borders, is no doubt the immediate cause of the subject chosen for this debate on 'European cultural identity' (Derrida 1992, 19)".

Some commentators accused Derrida, like in the past Albert Camus, that because of his Algerian origins, he makes an illogical and unjustified eulogy of the "Mediterranean", "solar", southern way of thinking and living, and criticizes the philosophical systems and cultural values of northern, transalpine Europe. Those accusations are erroneous. It is true that Camus and Derrida had sympathy and understanding, a real love, for the southern, too long neglected, colonized and exploited "headings" of Europe; but they contributed much more than most of French "metropolitan" intellectuals to let fall the iron curtain dividing Europe. In the 70<sup>th</sup> and in the early 80<sup>th</sup> Derrida came several times to communist Czechoslovakia, not only to help, but to participate, in the framework of Jan Huss Association, together with the persecuted "dissidents" in the clandestine philosophical seminars and political discussions about the future of Europe. Those Derrida's activities were unknown to the public opinion; until December 1982, when he was arrested in Prague for "contraband of drogues" which were of course put in his luggage by the local secret police. This unusual story is very well described and clarified in Derrida's *Circonfession*. Derrida gained the hearts of his friends, intellectuals in Eastern Europe by a genuine respect he proved for their way of life and their philosophical and literary works.

In the first chapter, entitled "Secrets of European Responsibility" of his beautiful and inspiring text *The Gift of Death*, written also in 1990, Derrida analyzes the book of the Czech dissident and philosopher Ján Patočka *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*. He refers to Czech Patočka's philosophical terms exactly by the same way as he refers to Platon's terms in Greek or Heidegger's in German. But why did he give his chapter about Patočka the title "Secrets of European responsibility"? He comments Patočka's comparison of platonic and Christian metaphysics, mainly the interrelationship between the concepts of "the sacred", "mysterium tremendum" and "the responsibility". The Czech meaning of the term "responsibility" "odpovědnost" has a connotation of "personal, individual" responsibility. The just and proper understanding of European History requires according to Derrida to take a personal responsibility for its past. He remarks:

"For at the center of Patočka's essay the stakes are clearly defined as follows: How to interpret 'the birth of Europe in the present sense of the world'? How to conceive of 'European expansion' before and after the Crusades? More radically still, what is that ails 'modern civilization' inasmuch it is European? Not that it suffers from a particular fault or from a particular form of blindness. Simply, why does it suffer from ignorance of its history, from a failure to assume its responsibility, that is, the memory of its history *as* history of responsibility? (Derrida 2008, 5-6)

The analysis of Patočka's book serves Derrida as a point of departure of his "deconstructionist" reading of the texts of Plato, Nietzsche, Kafka, Heidegger, Levinas, and mostly and mainly of Kierkegaard. The last chapter of *The gift of the Death* is entitled "tout autre est tout autre". Even in the English translation of this text the translator kept this French formula. Derrida argues that "man" respecting the "other" is on one hand

obliged to the common moral values of the society, but, on the other, he is also "tout autre", it means that as "decision-maker" facing "undecidable" dilemmas of real life, he has to take personal responsibility, even if he transgresses by this general ethical values of the society. For Derrida, as for Kierkegaard, the archetype of such a man is biblical Abraham, common father of the three monotheistic religions. Even in the non religious perspective, Abraham keeps "Secrets of European responsibility" and therefore, even today, according to Derrida, we need him, as we need the values, he transgressed, for solving, the "unsolvable" conflicts and challenges of our time.

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## Bio-note

Martin Rodan, born in Slovakia, immigrated to Israel after occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army. He studied French Literature, Classical Studies and Philosophy at the Universities of Bratislava, Jerusalem and Clermont-Ferrand where his doctoral thesis on *Camus and Antiquity* was accepted and awarded. He is a senior lecturer of aesthetics and philosophy at the Hadassah College and of French Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 2009 he published the book *Notre culture européenne, cette inconnue (Our unknown European culture)* about the cultural history of Europe at Peter Lang Publishing House in Switzerland. He publishes articles about French writers and philosophers in the literary supplement of the daily "Haaretz", as well as other general and academic articles in Hebrew, French and Slovak. He is also honorary consul of the Slovak Republic in Jerusalem.