

LUCIANA CASTELLINA

*Interview*

EUROPEAN?

*A founder member of the Partito di Unità Proletaria, you were several times elected to both the Italian National Assembly and the European Parliament. How long did you serve as an MEP?*

**F**OR TWENTY YEARS, from 1979 to 1999. Before 1979, the European Parliament was formed by delegations of the national parliaments, but since then it has been directly elected by universal suffrage. At the time we all supported this move, thinking it would make the Parliament more democratic, but that's proved nonsense. Before, there was more of a link between the European and the national parliaments, because the same people were involved; now that the deputies to one are not the same as those elected to the other, they have no occasion to meet. As a result, what happens at the European Parliament is unknown at the national level. You end up with this paradox: questions are discussed in Strasbourg, but when the moment comes for national assemblies to ratify the decisions made there, no one knows what members of their own party said in the European Parliament.

The newspapers rarely talk about the European Parliament either—in my case, the Italian papers wrote about my work there only once in twenty years, because a monkey bit me when I was in Zambia with a parliamentary delegation. Naturally, the decisions of the European Parliament do get publicized, but not what accompanied them—the debate, discussions and so on. The most interesting feature of the European Parliament is that representatives from different countries and cultures, with different histories, gather to discuss a single question; but none of this makes it

through to the national arena; it is all lost, vanishing somewhere between Strasbourg and Brussels.

*Looking at the European Parliament from a British perspective—but perhaps also, a future Italian one, if the ‘Legge Truffa’ is passed—wouldn’t one have to say there is one positive feature, which is the rule that these elections have to be more or less proportional in representation? So even if Italy abolishes any kind of proportionality, you would still have it at the European level.*

It’s true that the proportional representation system means that there is a Green British MEP, for example, whereas it is unimaginable that there could be a Green MP at Westminster, any more than a Green US Congressman, given the first-past-the-post system there. But each country adapts the European PR system as it sees fit. Thus, some have a higher or lower threshold; Britain has a thorough-going constituency system, whereas Italy has just five constituencies, and party lists. And whether or not proportionality is abolished in Italy—currently Berlusconi wants to keep it, because it aids the far left against the Democratic Party—it could still be dispensed with by the European Parliament. It depends what rules it sets for itself, since this is within its competence. It is possible that there may come to be party majorities at EU level in favour of abolishing PR. Of course, that would wipe out many of the smaller parties represented there.

*Where is most of the life of the Parliament conducted?*

In Brussels, on the whole. One plenary a month is held in Strasbourg, so deputies spend four days there. But all the Committees are in Brussels, and all MEPs are members of one or more of these, so they stay in Brussels two, three or four days a week. And supplementary plenaries are held there four times a year. Then there are regular meetings of the parliamentary groups, also mostly held in Brussels. Essentially, what you have is a band of nomads constantly on the move. In the beginning it was even worse: parliamentary meetings were held in Luxembourg as well as in Brussels and Strasbourg. Now that is no longer the case, but there is still a lot of shuttling between the two bases. Every year, a large majority of deputies would vote to say they did not want to go to Strasbourg any more, and that everything should be moved to Brussels, to save time and money. Strasbourg is much harder to get to—you have to go via Paris, whereas there are plenty of direct flights to Brussels. But from the start, even when there was only the European Coal and Steel Community, it

had been decided that Strasbourg would be the centre—France insisted on this symbolic point—while the 1965 Brussels Treaty says that the city is the seat of the European Parliament. So the annual vote to move remained the mere expression of a wish. The thing can't be changed, even if everyone complains. The deputies have to carry reams of papers, going back and forth between airports; it's a terrible way of working.

*How important is the continual 'navette' between Strasbourg and Brussels—presumably this serves to fragment the life of the institution?*

Mostly it fragments families! Deputies are always away from home. There is a further difficulty, since not only documents but nearly 800 deputies, and twice as many officials and secretaries, have constantly to be moved between Strasbourg and Brussels. One of the amusing side effects of this is that there are plenty of love affairs—which is of course what happens when thousands of young people are dispatched to work in a city away from home. On the other hand, there are many ways in which things function better than in our national assemblies. The Europarliament has more modern premises—not like Westminster, which is just impossible—and has enough offices for all the deputies, unlike the one in Italy. The technology was from the start more up to date in Strasbourg too, and the administrative staff are very efficient.

*Can you tell us about how the Parliament actually works? How much interaction is there between deputies—is there any real convivenza?*

I sometimes think it should be mandatory for any national deputy to spend at least a year in the European Parliament, to understand that politics can be seen from different standpoints, from other cultures. But in practice, there is very little human contact between deputies of different nationalities. In the evenings, everyone goes to dinner with their fellow countrymen—Germans with Germans, Italians with Italians; it is very rare to see people of different nationalities dining together. There are many reasons for this—they eat different things, at different times, they generally don't speak each other's languages. Everyone reads their own national newspaper: the Italians come along with *La Repubblica*, the Spanish with *El País*, the British with the *Guardian*, the French with *Le Monde*. There is no communal life. Once I tried to put together a Wednesday evening cinema circle, together with Catherine Trautmann, then mayor of Strasbourg; it was a complete failure—hardly anyone came,

and when they did it was to see films from their own country. This has improved somewhat in recent years, but to begin with it was terrible.

Curiously, though, this national clustering is much less noticeable among the UK deputies—instead there is a rigid division along party lines. Conservatives and Labourites rarely have coffee together, as if they were two completely separate species, whereas Italian Christian Democrats, Communists and Socialists, who are much more distinct ideologically, all eat together, play cards afterwards, and are on first-name terms. These are to some extent matters of ‘national character’, but there is also the question of different political cultures—different ways of speaking and of approaching a subject. Sometimes this ends in disaster, and the discussion breaks down because the translators are unable to continue; it’s not a technical problem of rendering Italian into English or German into Spanish, but one of cultural translation. Even discussing North Sea fishing stocks, for example, an Italian will pose the matter as a dialectic between fish, coast and sea, silencing the translators, while an English MEP will be incapable of understanding a non-empirical speech. I have always hoped that a linguist would study the mode of expression of deputies to the European Parliament, because it would be a fantastic laboratory. There is much more homogeneity among deputies from the same country than among members of the same political party—it counts far more whether one is British or Irish than a Socialist or a Liberal. The hold of national structures is far stronger than any other affiliation.

One thing that generally happens very little, but that I did a lot, is taking part in the political life of other countries—going to congresses, conferences and so on. The European Parliament encourages this, but it is rarely done because each deputy is, after all, elected by a constituency, and doesn’t want to waste time dealing with others. The sentiment is particularly strong among the British, who can’t be budged from their constituencies, because on Fridays they have to go back there to meet their electors. It applies less among those elected from proportional lists, who therefore represent a party, which allows you to do other things.

*Is translation ever a problem?*

There is a perfectly good system of translation for all the meetings—though not, of course, for personal interaction. But translation is a

problem, because everyone insists on speaking their own language: the Danish will speak Danish, for example, even if they have good English. It can create difficulties when it comes to permanent delegations sent to non-European countries. I was vice-president of the Latin American delegation for many years, and was part of those sent to Turkey, Africa and Portugal before it joined the EU. On these trips, if there was a Greek deputy and a Dutch one, it was necessary to bring an interpreter for each. Any attempt to cut down on expenses by bringing only interpreters for English and French was strongly opposed. It was a matter of national dignity—the deputies could not give up their language. In that sense, the question of translation gives rise to some rigidity. It also creates an incredible amount of work, since all the documents have to be translated into twenty-three languages—or rather, twenty-three times twenty-three, since anything generated in Finnish needs to be put into Maltese, Hungarian, Greek, etc., and vice versa. In 1979, Mario Capanna, leader of the Proletarian Democracy Party, spoke in Latin as a protest, and was answered in Latin by a delighted Otto von Habsburg, son of the last Austro-Hungarian Emperor, and deputy for the Bavarian CSU for twenty years. Then there are those who want to provoke, speaking in Basque, Gaelic and so on, to show that ‘we are also here!’

*The personnel of the parliament presumably vary from country to country, but who wants to become a European deputy? It is often said that the material advantages are much greater than those of being a national deputy.*

The salary of a European deputy is actually the same as that of a national one, but they get a very generous daily allowance. In fact, most of the cost of the European Parliament is down to these allowances and travel expenses. Some spend their time in hotels and restaurants, while others use the money to buy flats in Brussels. Not in Strasbourg, since they only go there once a month. Deputies also have the right to hire staff, which is not always the case at national level. Most use this entitlement to take on researchers and assistants; but of course there are always some who will make the contract out in the name of their mother-in-law. The EU officials, however, as opposed to the deputies, are extremely well paid. They do interesting work, travel a lot; and Brussels is a beautiful city. The entrance exam is very demanding, since these positions are much sought after, and once you become an official you have a magnificent career ahead of you.

*What proportion of the deputies are actually fainéants—enjoying the position without really doing anything—and how many are ‘working’ parliamentarians?*

A certain number of the deputies don’t do anything at all. They arrive on a plane in the morning, sign for an allowance covering two days in a hotel, then take a plane straight home. This is the scandal of the European Parliament, but they are a minority—probably not more than 10 per cent. And of course, these types also exist in national parliaments. Most deputies are fairly conscientious and hard-working, but the question is: what do they do? A huge amount of time is spent simply showing visitors around. Each deputy has the right to bring forty or fifty people to see the Parliament—in fact, they are paid to do this—so they invite people from their constituencies. With 785 deputies, this means the building is constantly being invaded, more often than not by visitors in national costume. One day you have fifty Scots, with their kilts and their music, another day, the Bavarians. Their fares are paid, they stay for two days and get shown all round the building. They bring their local products and set up banquets in some corner of the Parliament: Pecorino Sardo, ricotta from Maremma. It looks like a village fair rather than a political assembly. Once, instead of bringing Italians, I invited some French people who had been organizing a very good cinema festival in Burgundy, which caused uproar—‘What! But they aren’t Italians!’—despite the fact that we are all supposed to be in a united Europe.

Then there are the lobbyists, who also take up a lot of the deputies’ time. All the big companies have representatives in Brussels, who are permanent fixtures around the Parliament. Most of the recommendations it makes are administrative in nature—car tyres need to be produced to such-and-such specifications. But these things can ruin an automobile company, so they send people to knock on the deputies’ doors, and ask how they plan to vote on an amendment that will affect sales of their product; it’s a lobbyism of small things. In addition to all this, of course, the deputies have the actual work of the Parliament: the debates, the committees, the groups, the external delegations, piles of documents to look at, as well as spending time in their constituency. For those who take it seriously, it is a very demanding job.

*What, then, is the principal motivation of those who become deputies—is the European Parliament regarded as a trampoline for making a political career?*

Today, becoming a European deputy is usually something that comes at the end of one's career. Almost everyone who goes to be a European deputy disappears from the domestic political scene; they no longer appear on television or get interviewed by journalists. (There are plenty of journalists in Brussels, of course, but they see their job as reporting on the statements made by visiting dignitaries.) It is the end point of a *cursus honorum*—once politicians reach the age of sixty and have done their active work, they are sent to the Europarlament. Some young people do manage to slip in, but they don't stay, because there is no political career for them there. They become separated from their own country, dealing with questions at issue for the international elite—African policy, for instance—but which have little resonance at popular level back home.

This was not always the case. When European deputies were first elected by universal suffrage in 1979, many aspiring politicians thought it was an interesting option—at that time figures like Willy Brandt, Enrico Berlinguer, Lionel Jospin, the 'cream' of European politics, were deputies to the Europarlament. The relationship between the German SPD and the Italian Communist Party was forged there, because these people used to meet. All the Party general secretaries wanted to be MEPs, because it provided them with an opportunity to make speeches on the European stage. Gradually that disappeared. The final nail in the coffin came with the 2004 ruling that one could not be both a European deputy and a national one (an Italian decision—they were the ones who had most double-seated members).

*In your time, were there figures within the European parliament who had the clear political aim of making the parliament something more significant?*

All European deputies, if for no other reason than that they are there, think the European Parliament should have more power. This is true of everyone—the English are all completely opposed at the beginning, but after six months every single one of them ends up pro-European. Ken Coates, for example, was violently against, but went through the same metamorphosis. I myself am sceptical about this. The implication

of giving ‘more power’ to the European Parliament is that it would thereby need to delegate these greater powers to the executive, in this case the Council of Ministers—that is, the heads of government. I’m very much against giving more power to this body in the absence of a common European political and civil society, to which Council members would be obliged to respond. At present no such shared public opinion exists, with the result that each minister feels answerable only to his or her national constituency, rather than to the European population as a whole. Decisions made by the EU are not considered as legitimate as those taken by a government, even if one opposes it, at national level. But in any case, in a globalized world ‘democracy’ has become much more managerial in nature; national parliaments too have fewer powers of decision. Romantics on the left may speak of increasing the clout of the European Parliament, but the ground on which this would stand is no longer there.

A second point often raised by deputies of the Centre Left is the question of enlargement. In this view the European Union is seen as a nice rich cake, and the poor are to be invited to eat their slice; Turkey, too. I have always been opposed to this, because it inevitably seemed to differentiate between ‘elite entrants’, who would be luxuriously integrated, and the rest, who would be marginalized. It would have been far better to help create autonomous networks in regions such as central Europe or the Balkans, and to then enter into co-operation with them.

*What were the most significant decisions taken while you were there?*

No decisions, because as you know, the European Parliament only has powers of ‘co-decision’—the Commission has a monopoly on legislative initiatives. The Parliament does not make laws, it has projects—for example, on development in the Third World. The European Parliament also busies itself with human rights, to an insufferable extent. Eduardo Galeano has spoken of the West’s tendency to see itself as being like the ‘golden metre’, which is kept in Paris and determines how long a metre is; one could say that the metre for human rights is kept in Brussels, and is used constantly to see if a country measures up or not. This is why the European Parliament feels authorized to have opinions about everything—except its own member states; on those, nothing can be said. For example, I was a deputy during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Maze hunger strikes and so on. My group also included some



Irish Republicans—but we could not raise the issue, because the UK is a member state, and we cannot discuss human rights in the UK. So a lot of time is spent discussing human rights in Haiti or Venezuela, something national parliaments do not do, since this is the terrain of foreign policy. In the European Parliament, a large part of the debate revolves around these questions, giving rise to fierce ideological clashes. In a sense, European deputies are freer to speak their mind on such matters than national parliaments, because MEPs are not making binding decisions; the fact of not having to tie the discussion to a legislative agenda makes for a more varied debate. A great deal of attention is given to treaties and international agreements—GATT and so on—which in my experience national deputies tend to ignore, entrusting them to bureaucracies.

So there are some positive aspects. The European Parliament is also a significant source of recognition and legitimation for politicians—everyone from the Dalai Lama to Evo Morales has passed through to address the plenary, and it is more or less routine to have a head of state or foreign minister speak before the Political Committee. This inevitably expands the mind: European deputies have a far greater knowledge of the world than those in national parliaments.

*What about political groupings within the Parliament—how real are the Socialist group, the conservatives, and so on?*

The curious fact about the European Parliament is that it is a parliament without a government. There is no ruling majority, no opposition—majorities form on individual questions, but the traditional dialectic of political life is lacking, as MEPs have neither to defend governmental positions nor oppose them. The real dialectic unfolds within the groups, which have a tendency to become small parliaments in their own right. Especially the big groups—the European People's Party, the Party of European Socialists. My own group, Partito di Unità Proletaria, initially formed part of the Rainbow Group, but then joined the group of 'Communists and Allies', which eventually became the European United Left. The groups meet as a whole once a month, the week before the Strasbourg plenary; as well as that, all the Socialists on the Budget Committee or those on the Foreign Affairs Committee will caucus separately too. Within these groupings there are very different positions, generating real debates—the Greek and British deputies in the same Socialist group will vote differently, for example. The Party of European

Socialists exists, in theory, but each of the national parties refused to have a single 'European' party membership card. The declarations and programmes of these parties are always vague, so it's hard to see in what sense they actually exist.

*How do you get onto the committees?*

Through the D'Hondt method. It is rigorously applied. Say the Popular grouping has a hundred seats, the Socialists ninety and the Communists twenty. The largest groups get first choice—the presidency of the Political Committee is considered the most prestigious, or that of the Institutional Affairs Committee, and so on. The small groups get what is left. This is how things are divided up—the deputies do not so much choose as get told what is available. Our group got what was then the Committee on Culture, Media, Youth, Sports and Education because it was considered of no interest. There was a political battle when Berlusconi's men arrived in 1994; a lot of MEPs from the Left felt we should prevent the fascists among them from getting presidencies. But in the end we had to give up, because renouncing the D'Hondt method would have meant undermining the Parliament's whole system.

*Which committees have you worked on?*

The Committee on Development and Cooperation was the first, from 1979 to 1984. I chaired the Committee on Culture from 1994 to 1997, and the External Economic Relations Committee, dealing with economic treaties, for a year from 1998. In addition to the committees, I was a member of various delegations. Before any new country was admitted there were years of joint discussions; the delegation to Portugal lasted a long time, the one to Turkey is of course still ongoing. I was also part of the Latin American delegation, at the time of the guerrilla wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, and the negotiations through the Contadora Group—we organized the first official joint seminar, with Cuba. And I was a member of the ACP–EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, which twice a year brings together MEPs with deputies from the ACP—'African, Caribbean and Pacific'—countries that have political, commercial and economic ties with Europe; in practice, the ex-colonies.

*What has been the place of culture in European integration, in your experience?*

In the Treaty of Rome of 1957, the word ‘culture’ doesn’t even appear, nor is there any reference to it in the Single European Act of 1986. It is mentioned for the first time in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which only says that it would be a good thing if there was some cultural co-operation. A small step forward was made in the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, which spoke of ‘cultural identities’, and the need to ‘support’, ‘encourage’, ‘conserve’ them. But any ‘harmonization’, as took place in the realm of trade, was explicitly ruled out. Exactly the same formulations appeared in the Constitution drafted for Giscard d’Estaing in 2005. By and large, culture remains the preserve of national states, and the Committee on Culture has no jurisdiction. This is why nobody wanted to be its president—it doesn’t deal with anything.

EU treaties always speak of ‘cultures’ in the plural, invoking the concept of diversity. Stress is laid on the idea that culture is not a commodity. But in reality, of course, it is always *also* a commodity, and since the EU is dedicated to the free circulation of goods, one line of thinking holds that cultural production should fall under the rules of free competition, and that subsidies or public funding for culture are illegitimate. The European Court of Justice made a key decision along these lines in 1974, in the ‘Sacchi’ case, concluding that television broadcasts were a commercial service. But in that case, TV and cinema should also have come under the remit of the Trade Commissioner. We on the Cultural Committee struggled constantly against this point of view.

At the end of the 1980s, there was a real shift, as everyone became aware of the extent of US penetration of European culture. The American share of the European cinema market had risen from 35 per cent to 80 per cent in the space of 15 years, and by this time it had become cheaper for TV broadcasters to buy an hour of *Dallas* than to fund production of their own series. Suddenly there was a whole string of summits and meetings, starting with one at Delphi in 1988; the following year, the first EU Audio-Visual Conference was held in Paris—the French are especially sensitive on this question, and began to speak of the ‘genocide of European culture’. The first concrete measure to emerge from this was the Television without Frontiers (TVWF) Directive, agreed in 1989, which was partly designed to harmonize broadcasting rules with a view to eliminating unfair competition; the idea was that there should be the same rules across the EU on frequency of advertising and limits on what could be shown to minors. But it also contained two potentially

far-reaching interventions: Article 4 required a minimum of 51 per cent of each broadcaster's transmissions to be European content—films, drama serials, documentaries; while Article 5 called for 10 per cent of broadcasting time or 10 per cent of budgets to be reserved for independent production. These two articles unleashed a huge struggle, as some governments and above all industry operators lobbied furiously against them. Eventually a qualification was added—'when possible'—which meant it was no longer compulsory for countries to apply them.

*Where did the opposition come from?*

Both from national governments on the commission and from deputies in the Parliament. The Parliament itself was split in two. There was strong opposition from almost all the countries in Northern Europe—for instance from Germany, where cultural matters are the preserve of the *Länder* rather than the Federal government; and from small countries whose production was too small to fill the 51 per cent. For countries like Italy and France, meeting the quota was simple, but Holland or Denmark would have to fill it with Portuguese or Greek films. They were horrified at the idea of having to show their populace films from these places. There was ferocious opposition from the UK, because its culture industry is closely linked with that of the Americans, who also fought very hard—their foreign trade representative, Carla Hills, wrote to the Committee on Culture and accused it of turning Europe into a fortress. During the Marrakech GATT talks Clinton even called Balladur and Kohl in the middle of the night to get them to change the EU's position.

There was a grand alliance against regulation of commercial television, between the Americans, Berlusconi, Murdoch and Kirch. They prefer to buy American soap operas, because producing in Europe is more expensive, and the markets are much smaller and more fragmented; the imported US template makes more commercial sense to them. Then there was lobbying from the American film industry: the Motion Picture Association of America has a permanent office in Brussels, and the studios and distributors also have staff there—in all there are around thirty people representing the interests of Hollywood. They have a huge advantage in Europe, where distribution is highly fragmented—by the end of the 90s, for example, there were over a thousand distributors, none of them continental in scope, whereas the US had only seven. By American law, distributors are not allowed to operate cinemas there, but there is

no such barrier in Europe. Warner, now owned by Fox, has been able to build an empire. The profits are huge, so the pressure brought to bear by the lobbyists is also intense. There was once a famous scandal because the MPAA had paid the cleaning ladies at the EU Parliament to give them the pieces of paper thrown away after meetings, so they could see what was happening during sessions on audio-visual policy.

In addition to the TVWF Directive, the very important MEDIA programme was launched in 1991 under Commissioner Carlo Ripa di Meana. It provided aid for pre-production, post-production, training and distribution, and had an initial budget of 200 million ECUs for the first five years. This was not much, considering it had to cover twelve countries at the time, and given that France alone spent twice as much on its cinema every year. But prior to this there was no way of financing such things at the European level—there is no article in any treaty giving authority to finance culture collectively. The US considered the MEDIA programme illegal, along with any public subsidies for production, as obstacles to the free market. There have been years of discussion and appeals, and the question has become even more difficult now because of new media. It is no longer just TV and cinema, but also the internet and so on, and there are thousands of carriers. The collisions between the Committee on Culture and MEPS working on telecommunications have intensified—they insist that we must allow the market to be dynamic, and leave open the possibility of full deregulation; Martin Bangemann, a German Liberal from the FDP, in particular insists that regulations arise from scarcity of carriers. The Committee on Culture obviously says otherwise.

*Who have been the Commissioners in charge of culture?*

At the moment it's the Slovak Ján Figel'. The first Commissioner was Ripa di Meana, followed by João de Deus Pinheiro. From 1999 to 2004 it was Viviane Reding, who then became Commissioner for Information Society and Media. When she went she took audio-visual affairs with her—something we fought against, since we have always said that film and television are not the same as telecommunications. The interest of telecommunications lasts as long as a phone call, and it doesn't matter what is said, the telecom company makes money all the same. What counts in the audio-visual sphere is not how long something lasts, but the quality of what it says. Therefore, I always fought to keep the two

things separate. But in the end, we accepted it when Reding took the audio-visual brief to the ISM Commission, because she had to some extent fought these battles with us, and it was better to have her dealing with it than some non-entity.

*How are such cultural programmes as do exist enacted?*

The Committees cannot issue regulations that then become compulsory—it has no authority to make laws. What it does instead is to set up projects, and issue funds for those. A few began in the 1980s, but the member-states remained very guarded against any harmonization of cultural or educational programmes. A second wave emerged in the 1990s, after the Maastricht Treaty: in education there were the Socrates, Leonardo and Erasmus programmes; there was Raphael, for conservation of monuments; Ariane, for translation and diffusion of books; Kaleidoscope, which encouraged artistic activities and co-operation between organizations in three or more EU countries. In 1999 the ‘Culture 2000’ framework for funding all this was set up, with an annual budget of 167 million ECUs—equivalent to 0.03 per cent of the EU’s total budget.

The largest part of the EU Commission’s money goes to regional programmes, which are nominally not supposed to deal with culture. But cultural activities may have an economic dimension: they can provide opportunities for employment, which has allowed, for example, the Irish to use European money to fill Dublin with theatres, workshops and the like. Others have used the money to help convert their economies from industrial to post-industrial ones, which has involved a lot of cultural projects. The most varied cultural activities are incentivized. Then there is the programme for the ‘European Capital of Culture’, which was invented by the Greek Culture Minister Melina Mercouri. To begin with there was one a year, decided by a commission, but now there are several, because the cities in question make a lot of money from tourism.

*How many students are now involved in the Erasmus programme, and how has it worked?*

Nearly 160,000 students a year now take part in Erasmus, which funds university students going abroad for part of their degree. About half come from France, Germany, Spain and Italy, with Poland, Belgium and the UK accounting for another 15 per cent. It has ended up being a typical

theft by the rich from the poor. The sums given to the students are not enough to live on—the basic Erasmus grant is 245 euros a month. This means that the people who enrol are those whose families can give them what they need to survive. It is a big gift to the children of the well-off, using public money. It would have been better to have organized a kind of European public service, so that people could go to Hungary to be a postman for six months, for example, which would have been accessible to everyone. Instead, the Erasmus programme is just for the elite. Nevertheless, it is at least something—there are now young people who speak more foreign languages, who have seen more of the world.

*Has there been harmonization in the question of mutual recognition of university degrees?*

At first there wasn't, but it has now finally come about. But the problem is that, since there is no harmonization of educational programmes, one degree in history is very different from another. How do you recognize something that is so dissimilar? So there was a phase when it was agreed that the key thing was to have accurate descriptions of the curricula—but no one trusted anyone else. A slow, complicated process has been underway ever since, which can always be brought to a halt by one or another objection, since in matters relating to culture there is a requirement for unanimity. This question of procedure is a very important one in the European system. Where the Commission wants to pass something quickly, a majority is enough. In areas they don't care about, there has to be unanimity. Liberalization of capital flows? You get a majority and that's that. But where culture is concerned, unanimity is the rule. France, for example, is insistent on this, because they are worried the others will sell out European culture to the Americans, so they want to retain a right of veto. As you can imagine, this slows things down tremendously, often bringing everything to a standstill.

In some cases, where there is no possibility of harmonization, a substitution takes place. For example, the Eurimages programme, which provides co-production funds for European films; many would not have been made without this assistance, notably the recent Romanian 'New Wave'. But the British were opposed to Eurimages, and it was impossible to go ahead with it. So in 1988, it was transferred to the Council of Europe—founded in 1949 as an inter-governmental body, and therefore not bound by any of the same procedural rules as the EU. Likewise, the

European University Institute in Florence is not an EU programme, it is an inter-governmental project, because there has never been unanimity on it. The Council of Europe has remained somewhat marginal, and has fewer funds to distribute, but they can often do things well because they are in some ways freer—as in the case of Eurimages. Projects that cannot be taken forward within the EU, because unanimity has not been reached, are often transferred to the Council of Europe.

*If you look back to the 70s, when you entered the European Parliament, and compare the situation today, what progress could you cite in the construction of anything like a European culture?*

Absolutely none—there has been a movement backwards, if anything. In 1979, there was still some sense that there was such a thing as Europe. But with the enormous changes wrought by globalization, ‘Europe’ has lost any real meaning; it has lost its internal coherence. In foreign policy, the EU does what the US tells it to. In commerce, European countries have stronger relations with China than with each other. In the realm of culture, people in Europe read more American than European literature, as Franco Moretti has pointed out. I mentioned the Ariane translation programme, which the English have always opposed—everything is translated from English anyway. Twelve years ago, when I was president of Italia Cinema, the state agency for promoting film, I drafted a long document in which I tried to compare the current situation with the Quattrocento. In the 1400s, you had a real interchange among painters’ studios, Florentines travelled to Rotterdam, the Dutch to Italy, Spinoza was translated into ten languages—there really was a Europe-wide circulation of artists and writers. Today, that isn’t the case. There is certainly a circulation of American culture, but interchanges within Europe are far fewer than before.

*Are you saying all the directives—for example, in defence of European cinema—have had no practical effect?*

No, they did have some impact. But above all on domestic production, not at the intra-European level. Ulrich Beck might say that, thanks to low-cost air travel, labour mobility, inter-marriage, student exchanges, we have become much more European. Not true: it has made us more global, rather than European. The low-cost flights go to Thailand as well as to Holland. It seems to me that globalization has produced localism,



a watering down and narrowing of national identities to regional or even town level. If you ask someone in Tuscany where they are from, they will not reply 'Italy', but 'Porto Santo Stefano'.

But since there is no European identity, you find yourself asking 'why Europe?' In what way is Europe different from the rest of the world? Besides the EU, the speciality foods and cheeses? The Union not only negotiates the cost of labour, it is also the bearer of values and principles. Ultimately, European society has retained a certain distance from the market, from 'economism'. However, this is slowly disappearing—especially since the entry of the Eastern states, which are very openly pro-American. Then there is the question of immigration: what has European identity become, given that a third is now made up of people of non-European origins?

But—to end on a political note—the truth is that all international organizations are in rapid decline; even the WTO has become less important. They worked well when a single power was in charge, but now it is enough for a country like China to raise objections, and the multilateral approach crumbles. Everyone is instead moving forward on a bilateral basis, and Europe will in the end do the same. In the midst of this decline, the conclusion to be drawn is that a measure of democracy is possible, but that overall, globalization is leading us backwards, into fragmentation and tangled bilateral relations. The European Union forms part of that tendency; that is its fate.