

Interpretation

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Angelo Panebianco and Sergio Belardinelli, *All'alba di un mondo nuovo*.
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Il Mulino (Bologna) is one of the most distinguished academic publishers in Italy. In the last fifty years, it has become a reference point of the Italian intellectual and political debate. *All'alba di un mondo nuovo*, the latest contribution to the renowned il Mulino series *Voci* (voices) is meant as a forceful intervention in this debate: the title announces that we have arrived *At the Dawn of a New World*. The book presents two short essays on the crisis of Western civilization written, respectively, by Angelo Panebianco and Sergio Belardinelli, two professors at the University of Bologna. Panebianco is a secular political scientist whose research concentrates mainly on liberalism, elitism, and political realism, and Belardinelli is an eminent Catholic sociologist and one of the most important interpreters of the work of Niklas Luhmann. As we learn from the title and the preface (7–14) of the book, what worries Panebianco and Belardinelli is an impending global political change. The authors, notwithstanding their differences of belief, share a common politico-philosophical ground. The preface informs us that, on one hand, Belardinelli, a man of faith, “recognizes the necessity of the mutual autonomy between the religious sphere and the secular sphere”; and that, on the other hand, Panebianco, a nonbeliever, “deems it impossible to separate European identity from Christianity” (8). Belardinelli and Panebianco also see Western liberal civilization as “the most important ‘gift’ of modern Europe to the world”; in their opinion, this gift is the “accomplished result of the Christian tradition.... Liberal civilization was and could be born only in Europe, because of its Christian origins” (10). From a methodological point

of view, it is important to note that both authors adopt a realist approach (which they dub “liberal realism”), which has a moral and an interpretive implication. The moral implication is a sense of responsibility toward the “effectual truth,” for “only by looking at reality as it is...can we avoid an irresponsible escapism” (11–12). In this way, realism is a form of morality. As concerns the interpretive implication, they observe that only realism permits them to see the uglier aspects of humanity’s struggle for power. The differences between their analytical efforts are then due to the perspective from which they look at the crisis of the West.

Panebianco’s essay, “L’Europa sospesa tra Occidente e Oriente” (Europe suspended between the East and the West), focuses on the institutional and geopolitical issues underlying the present crisis of Western civilization. He addresses three principal points of interest: (i) relations between the United States and the European Union; (ii) the structural and political flaws of the European Union; (iii) the pressure exerted by Eastern countries from the outside, and by Islam from the inside. Following John Ikenberry, Panebianco maintains that the United States, by assuming the leadership of the free world, has created a “system based on consensually accepted rules, in which the hegemonic power has consented to its self-limitation in exchange for its partners’ recognition of that hegemony” (33). The problem is that, today, both pillars of this system, namely, NATO and the EU, are alarmingly wavering. The United States is progressively losing ground in the global scenario, and the EU is suffering a deep institutional and legitimacy crisis. While in past decades the process of European integration was guided by the elites, this process is today the subject of a heated political debate within every single European country. Panebianco identifies three main reasons for the mounting anti-European sentiment: the migration crisis; the sovereign-debt crisis; and the conflict between supranational and national institutions (44–47). He further highlights two structural flaws of the EU. First, “the process of [European] integration has...a symbiotic bond with the Atlantic community.” European integration was made possible by the fact that the United States had taken it upon itself to defend the West militarily while the European countries concentrated on their internal socioeconomic equilibrium: in a nutshell, “warfare to the United States, and welfare to the EU” (45). This “division of labor” has now two consequences: it “hinders an autonomous European policy of security” (46), and, by virtue of that dependence, the crisis of Atlantic relationships aggravates the internal European crisis. Second, “the traditional vagueness of the ultimate aim” (46) of European integration, while an advantage in the past, has now become a major difficulty.

Considering also the geopolitical bearings of the most important religious changes of our time—the new global strategy of the Catholic Church, and the presence of Islam within Europe—Panebianco foresees a progressive isolation of Europe, and a future scenario in which it risks becoming prey to external great powers: Russia, China, and the United States. Panebianco's concluding words are quite drastic: the future of the global order depends on the survival of Western civilization. His thesis is that “without the primacy of the West, no international order will be possible; that order would be replaced by a condition of endemic disorder and chaos” (65–66). By “order” Panebianco means “predictability” founded on “uninterrupted, intertwined chains of self-fulfilling prophecies” (67). This is the necessary condition for the possibility of a flourishing life. Panebianco holds that only the Western world has the cultural, political, and economic means to establish and maintain an order acceptable to the greatest part of mankind. Ultimately, it is necessary to reestablish the three pillars of such a liberal order: the “inter-Atlantic relationship,” “the process of European integration, although on new foundations,” and the balance between “the competence of the few, and the right of the many to have a say in public matters” (71–72).

In his essay “L'Europa e la Chiesa cattolica” (Europe and the Catholic Church), Belardinelli questions whether European civilization would be conceivable if alienated from its Christian roots, and whether the Catholic Church would be conceivable if detached from its European heritage. In his view, “the Catholic Church would not have reached its full maturity without the challenge posed by the European enlightenment”; the same applies to European civilization, “for it is quite hard for Europe to remain itself” if it severs its vital connection to the Christian tradition (85). In order to describe the current state of the relation between European civilization and the Catholic Church, Belardinelli recalls Leo Strauss's thesis that “Jerusalem” and “Athens” denote two mutually exclusive answers to the question concerning wisdom; every synthesis between the two would amount to the impoverishment of both. (Belardinelli draws mostly on *Reason and Revelation* [1948] and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy* [1954], which have recently been translated into Italian and to whose publication Belardinelli's essay is the first major reaction.) In Belardinelli's view, this radical antagonism is unconvincing. He maintains the possibility of being a citizen of both Jerusalem *and* Athens. In support of his view, Belardinelli refers to Joseph Ratzinger and his claim that Christianity advances the Greek enlightenment, since both denied pagan religion: Christianity “came into the world by proclaiming that the divine *logos*,” invoked by Socrates in Plato's

Phaedo, “entered History” as Jesus Christ (90). Notwithstanding the point of disagreement, Belardinelli appropriates another statement from Strauss, that the antagonism between Jerusalem and Athens is the secret of the vitality of the West. He maintains in fact that “what today matters more is not whether philosophy and revelation are compatible...but the crisis of both. We live in a world where every trace of Athens and Jerusalem is at risk of disappearing” (94). From this point on, Belardinelli concentrates almost exclusively on the role of the church, and his analysis amounts to a stern criticism of contemporary Catholicism’s geopolitical strategy. Belardinelli laments a significant impoverishment of prophecy. “The prophetic force of denunciation” of the church “weakens because it appears to be too close to the logic of the world... too political and insufficiently eschatological” (96). In this connection, the problem of the Catholic Church emerges clearly. By virtue of its focus on the peripheries of the developing world, the church “falls into a moralism...at the basis of which seems to stand the failure to distinguish between religion, morality, and politics.” In fact, Belardinelli considers the “distinction between religious, political, and moral law...a most important conquest, in contrast to the organicism ruling in both Athens and Jerusalem” (101–2). In this way, Belardinelli’s liberal soul comes to the fore. “The truth of God can no more be imposed against the will of the individuals; it must always respect the dignity and liberty of every human being. The truth cannot be imposed by force anymore; freedom is the only ‘way’ to establish it” (105). Belardinelli considers “the values and the political and institutional orders” that guarantee that freedom to be nonnegotiable (109). In conclusion, he points to the true task of the Catholic Church. In Belardinelli’s view, the proper function of religion is talking about God. Only by remaining faithful to its own specificity can the church hope to revitalize itself and, accordingly, European civilization.

From a global consideration of Panebianco’s and Belardinelli’s essays, the following picture emerges: the world order depends on the West, for no alternative at hand seems to be viable; in turn, the West rests on two pillars (NATO and the EU) which are suffering internal struggles. These struggles, as synthetically recounted above, are of various natures. Although the authors avoid any kind of reductionism unfaithful to the complexity of reality, they isolate a single most important achievement of Western civilization, namely, the division of politics, morality, religion and economy as *the* keystone of freedom. Indeed, the greatest dangers of the present come from the conflation of one with the others. In this connection, it seems apt to recall what Belardinelli identifies as “the catalyst of the main problems of our time” (108), namely, Islam, which fundamentally denies the separation of morality,

religion, and politics. The integration of Islamic European minorities must include a process of modernization, implying the progressive separation of these “social systems.” On this point, Belardinelli and Panebianco are in full agreement. One might though wonder if it is at all possible to speak of “Islam” in this way, as if it were a uniform phenomenon. Given that their overall tone is not alarmist, but earnestly worried, such a simplification of the many strands of Islam into one might be justified in light of the partially hortatory nature of the essays. In fact, they remain open to the possibility of a renewal of Western civilization. The solutions Panebianco and Belardinelli have to offer assume the form of a recovery of the liberal global order championed by the United States and the EU. What remains to be seen is whence the energy needed to operate this recovery may come. To this effect, the clear perception of a clash of civilizations might be of help.