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Julien Benda's political Europe and the treason of intellectuals

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ABSTRACT

Whenever the problem of the relationship between culture and politics is addressed, Julien Benda undoubtedly remains the most frequently mentioned author at the international level. His indictment of the intellectuals' betrayal is as famous as his speeches to the European nation, published in 1933, about five years later than his widely diffused *La Trahison des clercs*. Throughout the *Discours à la nation européenne*, the author explicitly addresses the intellectuals already mentioned in his previous essay and asks them to assume responsibility – becoming protagonists of a new moral revolution. His intention was to reply to Fichte's well-known *Reden an die deutsche Nation*. The idea of Europe could be built to transcend nations, manifesting itself as the individual's renunciation of himself. In this way, the idea of Europe might appear as a 'moral act': renouncing the distinct and the finite and turning to unity and infinity. Benda was aware of the possible rise of a type of 'Europhile nationalism'. To prevent this, he saw it necessary to avoid the closure of the nation and prolong this movement of association so that it might increase its tendency to be inclusive. The political vision of Europe that Julien Benda hoped for should not generate European sovereignty. But, by prompting intellectuals to follow practical and political methods, he consciously exploits their role – stated in *La Trahison des clercs* – with the hope of building the moral and political framework of a united Europe.

KEYWORDS

Julien Benda; Europe; nations; intellectuals; French culture

Whenever the problem of the relationship between culture and politics is addressed, Julien Benda undoubtedly remains the most frequently mentioned author at the international level.¹ His indictment of the intellectuals' betrayal is as famous as his speeches to the European nation. Yet, beginning from the position taken by him during the Great War (particularly, in his contributions to *Le Figaro*),² a form of cultural nationalism can be detected in his writings, clearly showing the contradictory nature of his intellectual legacy.

Benda's engagement with the public together with his cultural nationalism both have their roots in the famous 'affaire Dreyfus',³ where, with Émile Zola's notorious article *J'Accuse ... !*, the new role of intellectuals seemed to have been born and brought to the general political attention, while, at the same time, the word itself of 'intellectuals' appeared in public debate.⁴ The problem of the intellectuals' role was summarized by Julien Benda about thirty years later. From then onwards, Benda's *La Trahison des clercs*,⁵ a work that is more often quoted than read, continues to express much of the evocative force of its title. In fact, this 'is one of those rare choices of title that sends the reader's imagination galloping ahead of him. Its coining was Benda's masterstroke. Small wonder that it quickly became a catch phrase, and its author, a man of notoriety'.⁶

After having provoked an intense debate with this book from 1927, Julien Benda published *La Fin de l'Éternel* in 1929.⁷ Some years later, he returned in an original way to the theme of the relationship between intellectuals and politics, with the *Discours à la nation européenne*,⁸ 'his most important declaration on international questions and the basis of much of his later activity for a unified Europe'.⁹ Written between June and December 1932,¹⁰ the pamphlet was printed on 28 March 1933, a few weeks after Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor of the Weimar Republic.¹¹ From January 1933, though, in three following issues, it had already appeared in 'La Nouvelle Revue Française', as happened at the time also to *La Trahison des clercs*.¹²

From the beginning of the *Discours à la nation européenne*, the author was aware of the untimely nature of his proposal.¹³ Like the earlier work, it considered Germany and France's cultural and political relationship to be decisive. In this context, just as the *Reden an die deutsche Nation* by Johann Gottlieb Fichte¹⁴ had represented the 'catéchisme du nationalisme'¹⁵ expressed at the dawn of the nineteenth century, Benda had composed his 'discourses' as a sort of new and necessary 'catechism of Europe': 'Europe se fera, ici, comme s'est faite la nation'.¹⁶

Through these discourses, the 65-year-old Benda explicitly addressed the intellectuals already mentioned in the 1927 essay and asked them to assume responsibility, becoming protagonists of a new moral revolution, in the same way that the nations had originally emerged. The message's recipients appeared to be the French cleric, the German cleric or the European cleric, who represented a transversal dimension within the various national cultural identities, which could be defined embryonically as the 'nation européenne'.¹⁷

Thus, Benda replied to Fichte's fourteen discourses held in Berlin between 15 December 1807 and 20 March 1808, with eleven discourse-chapters of varying length, which tended to be far less systematic and linear than those of the German philosopher, marked as they were by a certain repetitiveness in the contents. With an apparatus of notes remarkably like that of *La Trahison des clercs*, in general, the author was led to show off his erudition and, without too much balance and argumentative logic, to concentrate on some themes more than on others.

An epigraph and a summary introduced each discourse. The epigraphs were quotations from the works of Spinoza (Ch. I), San Tommaso (Ch. III), Renan (Ch. IV), Malebranche (Ch. VI), Descartes (Ch. X), and from *Acts of the Apostles* (Ch. V), *Isaiah* (Ch. VII), *Imitation of Christ* (Ch. VIII), *Odyssey* (Ch. IX), *Gospel of John* (Ch. XI), in the composition of a sort of intellectual pantheon in which clearly personalities of French culture and Christian tradition appeared. The only significant exception was the *Odyssey*. Only the second chapter presented an epigraph without authorship: 'L'âme de l'Europe était en eux'. It introduced a text of historical synthesis. With it, Julien Benda (the presumed author of this opening quotation) tried to think about the roots of the idea of Europe from Justinian to the twentieth century. However, rather than being a critical reconstruction that could reasonably confirm his thesis, the discourse appeared animated, as the author indirectly revealed, from the 'nécessité de renverser nos jugements' – a need that had the taste of ideology – the attempts made in the past to unify the European continent.¹⁸

According to Benda, the efforts to unite the European continent had consistently failed because, in reality, the idea of Europe, the idea of that 'union' – of which the intellectuals 'rêvez'¹⁹ – did not yet exist. He explicitly listed the protagonists of these historic occasions. We passed from Justinian to Charlemagne, from the popes of the thirteenth century to Charles V, to finish with Napoleon Bonaparte. The failures depended on how they wanted to achieve the union and the material they wanted to unify.²⁰ Undoubtedly, according to Benda, common to these personalities was the will to achieve Europe through force. They wanted to be rulers without being aware of the history of Europe, without having any idea of what they were doing and without knowing the relevance of the languages of the peoples they wanted to subdue. However, according to the author, the real point was that in any case, even if they had been disinterested and had not tended to give primacy to the spirit's matter, that same Europe – presented here in a sort of idealistic inspirational personification – 'ne voulait pas être faite'²¹ because 'elle ne concevait même pas qu'elle pût l'être'.²² As is

well known, he observed, 'l'idée que les hommes se font de leurs actes est, en histoire, plus féconde encore que ces actes'.²³

Europe – now more clearly understood as the cultural union of Europeans – had no conscience²⁴ to be Europe. Europeans 'subissaient' the commonality of interests, 'vivaient' the identity of feelings, but not 'pensaient' to the idea that it could give new meaning to interests and feelings.²⁵ According to Benda, 'l'idée politique'²⁶ had not yet manifested itself because – according to the theories and thought of Hegel – the idea of national identity, to which it was opposed, had not yet developed and exhausted itself. With an addition typical of his rhetorical style, which, however made him lose the rigor of the argument, he added: 'non seulement les habitants de l'Europe ne voulaient pas faire l'Europe'.²⁷ They 'voulaient ne pas la faire'.²⁸ It should be incidentally noted that both in unwilling to do and in willing not to do Europe, it would be necessary in any case to possess an idea of Europe. In any case, for Julien Benda, the whole of European history represented the progressive affirmation of this will contrary to the political unification of Europe. It was a clash of ideas. In his opinion, to be more precise, it was a contrast between possible forms of awareness that distinguished those who inhabited the European continent and gave a different meaning to their actions. Therefore, it is clear that history itself, in Benda's vision, had no objectivity and provided no cultural evidence.²⁹

On this point, it was noted that 'it remained unclear, however, whether there was something spiritual about Europe *as such* – or whether it was simply the conscious moral effort on behalf of individual Europeans to transcend national particularities which would effectively lead to a spiritually purified Europe'.³⁰ On the other hand, it was recently asked 'why had all of these attempts to create an enduring united Europe failed?'.³¹ According to Benda, the answer would be that 'while Europe had in some sense existed since the time of the Roman Empire, the idea of Europe had not'.³² But it is not fully correct to speak of 'some sense'. For him, the Roman Empire represented only a moment of greater rationality, which allowed individual nations to overcome particularistic selfishness. As we have seen in Benda's conception, the existence of the idea – the social diffusion of a certain awareness – was a necessary condition for the existence of reality. As has been said, 'it was, he argued, precisely this idea of Europe that needed to be established in order for the concrete reality of a supranational Europe finally to come into being'.³³

Faced with the two reasons for failure (method and object of unification), Julien Benda wondered if they had disappeared to give rise to the hope of a European political union. The answer was not particularly far-sighted, and, in December 1932, perhaps it could not be: 'On peut affirmer qu'on ne reverra plus l'homme qui, pour unifier l'Europe, pense à la conquérir et la traite ensuite comme sa chose. Les plus farouches pangermanistes eux-mêmes n'espèrent plus un Barbesse ou un Charles Quint'.³⁴ Moreover, he was an optimist because although nationalisms were still vigorous, the idea of Europe was finally born. It was only 'an embryo', and only a few people could understand it, as usually happened to ideas in the development process and could end up being affirmed. Julien Benda addressed himself to these few intellectuals. He thought they had the function of forging Europe, generating the necessary ideas, myths and values.³⁵ Among the tasks that he attributed to intellectuals is the priority of narrating a new story since history itself, as has been seen, had no objective evidence. In his opinion, it was necessary to present the dreamers who in the past had imagined that they could make Europe as the true heroes³⁶ (contradicting again, strictly speaking, what was said previously about the non-existence of the idea of Europe). In contrast, the failure of European unification would have become a disgrace that had compromised both peace and beauty. This new history was necessary to build a new 'religion'.³⁷

The second discourse, on the history of Europe and the idea of Europe, was immediately preceded and followed by two chapters where the author referred to two other requirements: that of changing the moral and aesthetic values of reference³⁸ and that of promoting the idea of Europe, 'aimée en tant qu'idée'.³⁹ A special relationship between the two chapters was implicitly declared by the presence, in both of them, of the comparison with the nations, concerning the possibility of Europe repeating its historical success. The expression already mentioned was repeated, with

the similar statement 'l'Europe se fera comme se firent les nations',⁴⁰ followed in the third discourse by the same identical expression.⁴¹

If in the first case the reference was to the fact that the nation, to be able to assert itself, had to constitute a nationalist 'morality';⁴² in the second case (still in the same chapter) referred to the necessary search for the primacy of moral changes in the function of economic ones.⁴³ However, in the third and last case, the discourse developed, going so far as to indicate the need to arouse 'love' for an idea that would allow people to transcend 'love' for objects more easily tangible and close to them, such as the inherited land or the surrounding province.⁴⁴

Concerning the second case, forcing the reasoning, people argued that Benda 'ne s'intéresse pas aux conditions économiques ni politiques de l'Europe: l'intendance suivra la réforme intellectuelle et morale' ('Les changements économiques qui semblent avoir formé [les nations] n'y ont vraiment réussi que le jour qu'ils furent soutenus par des changements moraux'). In a more explicit form, it is reiterated that 'Benda considère que c'est le changement moral qui produira le changement économique'.⁴⁵ But the author spoke of morality as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition so that economic changes could occur without any automatism.

Basically, Julien Benda's discourse revolved around the importance of awareness, as was also clear from another similar passage: 'Europe se fera comme s'est fait le Parti ouvrier'. It arose not because the proletarians had perceived certain common economic interests, but because 'une idée religieuse' had developed in their consciences, the moral idea of possible solidarity among themselves to improve the future: 'L'action morale doit être transcendante aux phénomènes économiques, encore que sollicitée par eux'.⁴⁶ However, according to some interpreters, the European unification 'was conceived as a victory of the abstract over the concrete – although again it remained unclear whether it was the cause or the consequence of a comprehensive reordering of values'.⁴⁷ In this regard, the clarity of Julien Benda is out of the question. He presented European unification as a consequence of a reorganization of values through a cultural persuasion action. The 'European nation', to which he referred, had characteristics peculiar to those 'imagined communities' defined by Benedict Anderson in his famous work on the birth of nationalisms.⁴⁸

The author underlined the importance of the primacy of the abstract over the concrete. In order to ease the affirmation of the idea of Europe, he suggested preaching respect for the Roman Empire,⁴⁹ which had preceded the birth of nations and, like the idea of Christianity, had enabled societies to overcome cultural divisions.⁵⁰ In the historical transition from first Roman and then Christian unity to national identities, Benda identified a fundamental and harmful role played by the humanists, who had nurtured individual passion instead of fighting it.⁵¹

Benda stated the praise of Latin against the national languages⁵² and presented it as a way to re-evaluate the culture understood in the Greco-Roman sense against the Germanic meaning. The first implied the idea of luxury, uselessness, and non-practical value, while the second contemplated obtaining the maximum contribution for the State from each individual.⁵³ Therefore, concerning the concept of culture, the author gave some special considerations on the universality of philosophical and scientific works and the limitation circumscribed to the national dimensions of artistic and literary works. While the former could understandably express their content regardless of the linguistic form used, the latter kept a universal value only for their 'beauté intellectuelle':⁵⁴ 'l'Europe sera plus scientifique que littéraire, plus intellectuelle qu'artistique, plus philosophique que pittoresque'.⁵⁵

According to Benda, artists were natural enemies of Europe, who have been already opposed to the abstract idea of the nation, against the concrete perception of the province.⁵⁶ In addition to them, other instinctive enemies were moralists of military heroism, fused with nationalism,⁵⁷ and supporters of the hierarchical principle proper to 'a certain catholicism' against democratic principles.⁵⁸ According to the author, these enemies did not have in common the desire for conquest or greed for profit, but were moved by peculiar artistic, moral, social or metaphysical reasons.⁵⁹

In the eighth discourse, Benda developed his idea of the importance of the abstract and the divine. He had already introduced the theme in the earlier chapter by noting the change in values that occurred during the nineteenth century. In the past, the concept of God meant the absolute. Now it had been relativized and humanized with the concept of evolution and graduality.⁶⁰ Because of the influence of Marxism, one had become accustomed to describing the divine as something that was perfected with time, as a subject fighting in history and overcoming obstacles. Faced with these philosophical tendencies, Benda invited readers to return to the philosophy of ‘essences éternelles’ and the idea of a perfect God.⁶¹ Therefore, Julien Benda’s reasoning continued, reflecting on the relationship between the divine and the natural. According to the author, nationalism had deified the national, which people had progressively perceived as an eternal category, where the individual found his affirmation and realization.⁶²

As he observed in his concluding discourse, each nation formed itself by passing through the two moments of ‘association’ and ‘opposition’ in this process of divinization.⁶³ At first, the human being grasped his similarity with others based on similar characteristics, like the common language, ethnicity or interest, and abandoned his selfishness. With the next moment, this individual selfishness returned in the name of the group the individual believed him or herself to belong to, opposing themselves to those who were different.⁶⁴ Thus, Benda explained that the root of nationalism was the desire to stand out from the world through belonging to a group. This way, individual selfishness, which had become national, became sacred.⁶⁵ Following this example, the idea of Europe could therefore transcend nations, manifesting itself as a form of renunciation of the human being to himself. This way, Europe could manifest itself as a ‘moral act’ that renounced the distinct and the finite, turning to unity and infinity, deifying itself.⁶⁶

He was aware that a kind of ‘Europhile nationalism’ could arise. To prevent this, he affirmed that it was necessary to avoid the closure of the nation and to prolong this movement of association so that it might tend to be inclusive. The political Europe that Julien Benda hoped for should not generate a ‘souveraineté européenne’.⁶⁷

In this regard, people commented that ‘when he understood European unification as a pure moral project, he also resisted the idea of a “European nationalism” or “European sovereignty”’.⁶⁸ However, Benda’s position is different. If this political aim had failed, he thought that European selfishness would have been better than the national one, because less particular and less material: ‘Faites l’Europe, même souveraine, et le dieu de l’Immatériel déjà vous sourira’.⁶⁹ Suppose it may seem that ‘Europe, contrary to what the title of his pamphlet implied, was precisely not to be another nation’.⁷⁰ In that case, to understand Benda’s position, it is necessary to distinguish ‘national’ from ‘nationalist’. The Europe he wished for had to be precisely what the pamphlet’s title implied: another nation, free of the flaws that nationalism had produced. However, the institutional form in which this political Europe – obviously democratic but devoid of absolute sovereignty – would hopefully have to be reversed remained undefined.⁷¹

The problem of a possible ‘Europeanist nationalism’ was further complicated by the author’s proposal to consider French as a common language, replacing Latin.⁷² A year after publishing *Esquisse d’une histoire des français dans leur volonté d’être une nation*,⁷³ a successful work with rather chauvinist traits, Benda was aware of the paradox of his own ‘nationalist’ proposal and defended himself by declaring himself willing to accept another language, if capable of equal clarity.⁷⁴ He considered French the language of rationality, thus the most adequate for the affirmation of rational values that were to pervade the idea of Europe:⁷⁵ the rational part of the individual was ‘la seule dans l’embrassement de laquelle les hommes peuvent espérer sentir l’évanouissement de leurs oppositions, le levain de leur réconciliation’.⁷⁶ Established in the eighteenth century as a language capable of clearly expressing the most complex speculations, French had been put aside with the progressive affirmation of the irrational sphere, primarily through the cultural production generated in Germany during the nineteenth century. German Romanticism opposed the French Enlightenment.⁷⁷

Of course, Johann Gottlieb Fichte had played an influential role in this regard, with his reflection on the idea of the nation, the link between language and people, and the role of education in his, already mentioned *Reden an die deutsche Nation*. He was undoubtedly the touchstone that Benda had considered constantly in drafting his work and made many references to the German philosopher.⁷⁸ From the definition of his discourses to the German nation as ‘catéchisme du nationalisme’, with respect to which ‘les déclarations des autres nationalistes, touchant le même objet, n’en sont que des variantes’,⁷⁹ we pass to the reference to his exaltation of German as a ‘primitive’ language that allowed ‘l’expression la plus pure de cette racine de l’être’.⁸⁰ From the enunciation of the German people as ‘le peuple par excellence’, capable of expressing ‘une force originelle, productrice de choses nouvelles’,⁸¹ we arrive at its devaluation of reason. It was incapable of heroism, to which it was necessary to answer that, on the contrary, reason had many heroes, from Spinoza to Kepler, from Zola to Picquart.⁸² In addition to the fundamental concept of Fichte, who thought that one could access the eternal through the people to whom one belonged,⁸³ in Benda’s general reasoning, it seemed relevant that the morality expressed by the German philosopher could only lead to war between peoples.⁸⁴

It is interesting to note that in his discourses on the European nation, Julien Benda linked the affirmation of the idea of Europe to the diffusion of both democratic and pacifist principles. References about it appeared in several passages. Preceding his reasoning on the importance of abstract principles, Benda emphasized how the cult of what was practical could only lead to war.⁸⁵ He identified moderation – already mentioned in the first chapter as a value that could allow Europe to give up exploiting the planet⁸⁶ – as a virtue to be taught to the peoples so that their warmongering attitude could be dormant.⁸⁷ He also mentioned the moralists of heroism as enemies of both Europe and peace.⁸⁸ Even more explicitly, he argued that some people deluded themselves about the ‘bonne volonté’ of rulers or institutions such as the League of Nations to preserve peace.⁸⁹ According to Benda, it was not with historical evolution or with new economic conditions that peace would be affirmed (not to be understood merely as ‘absence de la guerre’⁹⁰), but thanks to an affirmation of ‘volonté’⁹¹ that passed through the way of reason.⁹² He noted that they wanted to ensure peace without foreseeing acts of will and sacrifices of a personal nature. On the other hand, the idea of Europe precisely implied this and demanded an ‘âme’ capable of dominating the national ones.⁹³ He added that it was not a matter of harmonizing national features⁹⁴ or inducing people to reflect on war as contrary to their interests⁹⁵ or, with his usual taste of irony, developing a particular European cultural sensitivity with trips abroad.⁹⁶ It was a matter of overcoming and transforming everything that had been allowed to affirm the idea of the nation with the creation of Europe: it would have been the forerunner of the ‘unité politique’.⁹⁷ The voluntarist conception of Europe expressed here is undoubtedly similar to that of Ernest Renan’s nation (often cited, but, surprisingly, not for his *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*). According to Renan, it was politically generated by the will of individuals to be part of it.⁹⁸ As stated, ‘one could point out that Benda’s proposal amounted to a projection of the famous definition of the nation by Ernest Renan on Europe’. In fact, ‘Benda’s was an entirely voluntary conception of collective identity, that is, a question of individuals willing to live together and form a collective political body’.⁹⁹

Benda based this link between Europe and peace on the latter’s relationship with democratic principles. Nationalism had initially presented itself as a revolutionary force of the peoples and had gradually transformed itself into a conservative force of the wealthy classes.¹⁰⁰ The ‘bellicisme’ of the conservatives was nothing more than a way they used to defend their authority in the face of the advance of democratic principles.¹⁰¹

Concerning the democratic ideal and the role of education (undoubtedly inspired by Fichte’s discourses), Benda addressed European intellectuals, precisely considering their potential role as educators. He outlined their characteristics and purposes. First, they had to consider their identity not bounded by national borders. From the formation of universities until the end of the eighteenth century, mainly thanks to the spiritual unity represented by the Latin language, educated people

had moved and taught throughout Europe. So, intellectuals needed to think themselves again at the service of universal values.¹⁰²

Benda explicitly addressed the French and German clerics and those of all nations. He invited the former not to be proud of forms of heroism manifested in the history of France but of the eventual ability to have an acute intelligence. To the German clerics, Benda asked in the same way, to be ashamed not of the defeat in the First World War but possible incorrect reasoning. In addition, he asked the Germans to recognize the faults of their nation for the outbreak of war and urged them, consistent with the authentic role of intellectuals, to worry about what was supranational. Addressing all the clerics of all nations, Benda asked them to be disinterested and accuse their respective nations of being in the wrong, 'du seul fait qu'Elles sont des nations'.¹⁰³ In the seventh discourse, the author resumed the rhetorical form of directly addressing the clerics (after it appeared for the first time in the fourth discourse), with the invitation to French clerics to defend culture in the Greco-Roman sense already mentioned.¹⁰⁴ Benda now invited them to an act of responsibility – by the characteristics of the French genius, inventor of method and creator of order – who rejected the cult of innovation. Thus, he also asked all the clerics to deny the religion of creation and originality. He asked them this to enhance the religion founded on reason.¹⁰⁵

However, it is astonishing that no interpreter has so far noted one specific aspect of this pro-European appeal, which distinguished the *Discours à la nation européenne*, often cited in general terms (without considering a particular cultural nationalism which is also present, as we have seen).

Historiography on Benda has neglected the political moment, which, as we have already seen, is well present in his work. Arguing that 'Benda's *Discourse* is a sequel to *The Betrayal of Intellectuals*', for example, one comes to write that 'when Benda calls for a moral reform, what he is asking from the Europeans is a real asceticism, which would bring them from the realm of feeling to the pure world of intellect'.¹⁰⁶ It has been stated that the *Discours à la nation européenne* is not aimed at those who 'want union on the economic, legal and political levels', but only at those who 'want Europe on the intellectual and moral level'.¹⁰⁷ People reiterated that speaking of Europe, 'Benda was moving on a not political nor economic ground'. Notably, 'Julien Benda's idea of Europe was that of a reality guided again by clerics who had not succumbed to the lures of politics'.¹⁰⁸ People have also not noticed the fundamental relationship between the moral and political moment of the idea of Europe desired by Julien Benda.¹⁰⁹ Finally, they noticed that 'it remained unclear how much anti-passion propaganda was really required'.¹¹⁰

But the fundamental point is that Benda was asking intellectuals to take charge of a propaganda action for the idea of Europe. They could do it thanks to the passion for the reason that should have distinguished them. As noted, 'Benda's defence of Europe did appear to indicate a significant change of posture'. Indeed, 'in 1927 he had spoken of the unification of mankind as merely the highest form of egotism, merely the substitution of a greater realism for that of separate nations'. While 'now (in 1932) he made no mention of those fears' and 'in speaking of Europe as a moment in return to the divine and in speaking of Europe as a moral act insofar as it was not an end in itself, he took an opposite tack'.¹¹¹ In other terms, 'now, it seemed, Benda was saying that the *clerk* might choose the lesser evil'.¹¹²

However, we can be even more precise. Julien Benda, author of the famous *La Trahison des clercs*, in the *Discours à la nation européenne* invoked, paradoxically and consciously, precisely the 'betrayal of the clerics', in terms of ideological propaganda, as necessary behavior so that the idea of a political Europe could affirm itself in the consciences of European peoples. Also in a recent monograph it was argued that, 'comme il l'expliquera dans son *Discours à la nation européenne*, cet universalisme militant n'est nullement incompatible avec la morale du clerc qu'il prêche dans *La Trahison*, car il suppose la séparation du temporel et du spirituel'.¹¹³ But, the problem is that in the *Discours à la nation européenne*, the separation between temporal and spiritual, in the action required of clerics, is not present.

Julien Benda moved an attack on humanist intellectuals who, unlike Erasmus of Rotterdam, had not been able to fight human passions, transcending divisions and defending the unity of Europe

and Christian culture: 'Honte à la trahison des clercs'.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, from the first discourse, the terms of Benda's appeal to the intellectuals was clear and invited them precisely to concur with the 'betrayal'. He said that to be educators consistent with what they would teach, to build a political Europe, the first moral reform they needed to promote was that within oneself.¹¹⁵ Clerics had to believe in the primacy of moral values over economic principles. If specialists claimed that a collective and coordinated economy was necessary, this economic revolution could only be achieved through a profound moral revolution: individualism's loss of value.¹¹⁶

Generally, Julien Benda recalled how it was the task of the intellectuals-educators to provide the European populations with a new 'système de valeurs'.¹¹⁷ However, he immediately pointed out that this function did not correspond to the high intellectual activity of the clerics, with which they sought the truth beyond axiological evaluations and moral judgements: 'le véritable homme de l'esprit ne occupe pas de construire l'Europe'.¹¹⁸ It was not a question of opposing pure reason to nationalist pragmatism but a question of other pragmatism. Benda called for the creation of European idols and myths as opposed to nationalist idols and myths. People needed to answer the nationalist mystical theology with the European mystical theology.¹¹⁹ 'Votre fonction est de faire des dieux. Juste le contraire de la science'.¹²⁰

In *La Trahison des clercs*, the infidelity Benda denounced was precisely the inability of some intellectuals to remain inspired by spiritual values against the spread of the passions of race, class and nation. Betrayal manifested itself through the progressive renunciation of rationality (which one had to use to seek the truth to pursue justice) and the gradual glorification of passions. Benda envisioned a possible political commitment, as long as it was alien to fleeting interests and practical purposes.¹²¹ In the *Discours à la nation européenne* he invited the clerics to become 'apôtres', the opposite of 'savants'. One could defeat the nationalist passion only through another passion: 'la passion de la raison'. Therefore, reason, which Julien Benda had exalted as the way to defeat passions in the work of 1927, is transformed. It was clear to him that 'la passion de la raison est une passion'. Thus, it is quite different from reason¹²² mainly if applied to a political purpose: 'A candid comment – and a pointed one'.¹²³

Incidentally, it is worth noting that in the text there is no trace of a relationship between the idea of Europe or its creation, nor the values of truth and justice, as some assert.¹²⁴ In any case, one can understand the change of perspective if one remembers that, in *La Trahison des clercs*, clerical values appeared static, disinterested and rational¹²⁵ and, if passionately supported, they ceased to be 'values'.¹²⁶ The clerics were people who belittled the passions and exalted 'des biens qui passent le temporel'.¹²⁷

In the *Discours à la nation européenne*, the first and fundamental aim that the clerics had to pursue, following the example of what nationalism achieved, was to rehabilitate the idea of eternity, which could then be declined from time to time in individual cases.¹²⁸ In his discourses, Julien Benda then asked intellectuals to exalt certain cults, like the Roman Empire¹²⁹ or the Catholic Church (the latter had committed itself to prevent the spiritual from flowing into the national).¹³⁰ He invited them to destroy the cultural work produced during the nineteenth century when the importance of nationality for defining the personality of intellectuals had begun to be stressed.¹³¹ Benda also defined the cultural weapon the clerics had to use to win his ideological battle. Following the teaching of Nicolas Malebranche, he asserted that to destroy passions it was necessary to ridicule them. Therefore, it was indispensable to make nationalism ridiculous, hateful and despicable.¹³²

In his fifth discourse, devoted directly to the role of educators, Benda repeated the terms of the first reasoning and reiterated that Europe was an idea. Only intellectuals devoted to that idea could realize it, 'non par des hommes qui ont un foyer'.¹³³ Indeed, since there was no European essence and no European 'Être',¹³⁴ political Europe could only be realized as a spiritual product of those who would support the idea. The clerics could contribute to the building of Europe through a form of communication consciously ideological: 'par ce que vous direz, non par ce que vous serez'.¹³⁵

So, unlike what was stated, compared to *La Trahison des clercs* this work is not a ‘restatement of its central idea, as well as an eloquent plea for internationalism’.¹³⁶ In *Discours à la nation européenne*, Benda asks intellectuals to betray the principles he presented in 1927 as a determinant for the identity of the cleric faithful to his role in society. Likewise, we can only superficially speak of an internationalist call. It seems to be more the praise of the French culture’s European unifying vocation or destiny. Benda’s ‘cultural nationalism’ disguises itself as Europeanism: ‘in outlining the formation and the nature of this European identity, Benda fell back not only on a particular national culture (his own), but also on the idea of national-cultural identity as such. And this led him into contradiction’.¹³⁷

By suggesting intellectuals follow practical and political reasons, Benda consciously exploited their role for the moral and political building of a united Europe. It was a goal that he considered worthy of being pursued. However, the Europe he wanted was a Europe of France, produced by politicized intellectuals, who placed culture at the service of a political goal.¹³⁸

Notes

1. See, for instance, the reflections by R. Aron, *L’opium des intellectuels* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1955); M. Walzer, *The Company of Critics. Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); N. Bobbio, *Il dubbio e la scelta. Intellettuali e potere nella società contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 1993); E.W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994); G. Steiner, *No passion spent. Essays 1978–1996* (London-Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996).
2. See D. Cadeddu, *Il chierico tradito. Julien Benda fra cultura e politica (1916–1933)* (Roma: Carocci, 2022), 19–52.
3. See A. Pagès, *L’affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: Perrin, 2019).
4. For an overview see M. Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999); P. Ory and J.-F. Sirinelli, *Les intellectuels en France: De l’affaire Dreyfus à nos jours* (Paris: Colin, 2004). More in general, see Jeremy Jennings and Tony Kemp-Welch, ‘The Century of the Intellectual: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie’, in *Intellectual in Politics: from the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie*, ed. Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–21; and ‘The Role of Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Europe’, ed. Jeremy Jennings, special issue of *The European Legacy*, 2000, vol. 5, no. 6.
5. J. Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* (Paris: Grasset, 1927); n.e. 1946; reprinted avec introduction d’Andre Lwoff, avant-propos d’Étiemble (Paris: Grasset, 2003); Eng. tr. by R. Aldington, *The Great Betrayal* (London: Routledge, 1928); Eng. tr. *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (New York: Morrow, 1928); with introduction by R. Kimball (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007).
6. R. Nichols, *Treason, Tradition and the Intellectual. Julien Benda and Political Discourse* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), 93.
7. J. Benda, *La Fin de l’Éternel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1929); n.e. 1977 [préface de René Étiemble] (Paris: Gallimard, 1977). According to Benda, this book is the ‘continuation’ of *La Trahison des clercs* (see J. Benda, ‘A Moral Program for Europe’, *Foreign Affairs* 12, no. 4 (1934), 630, note 2).
8. J. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933); new edn 1979, foreword by André Lwoff; reprinted in 1992.
9. R.J. Niess, *Julien Benda* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1956), 214.
10. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 127.
11. For more on this matter, see R.J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
12. See *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, January 1933, 36–57; *Ibid.*, February 1933, 213–32; *ibid.*, March 1933, 418–43. Benda’s collaboration with *La Nouvelle Revue Française* began with a letter in June 1914, intensified in the 1920s and ended with the article ‘Sur trois aspects du monde moderne’, published in July 1956, a month after his death.
13. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 16.
14. See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, translated, with introduction and notes by Isaac Nakhimovsky, Béla Kapossy and Keith Tribe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2013). In general, see *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, ed. D. James and G. Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
15. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 96.
16. *Ibid.*, 15.
17. *Ibid.*, 13.

18. Ibid., 22. On the idea of Europe, see S. Weller, *The Idea of Europe. A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) and C. Malandrino and S. Quirico, *L'idea di Europa. Storie e prospettive* (Roma: Carocci, 2020), to which reference is made for an extensive bibliography on the matter.
19. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 22.
20. See Ibid., 26.
21. Ibid., 30.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 32.
25. See Ibid.
26. Ibid., 33.
27. Ibid., 34.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 33–6.
30. J.-W. Müller, 'Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe', *European Journal of Political Theory* 5, no. 2 (2016): 129.
31. Weller, *The Idea of Europe*, 170.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 37.
35. Ibid., 38.
36. See Ibid.
37. Ibid., 40.
38. See Ibid., 14.
39. Ibid., 44.
40. Ibid., 19.
41. Ibid., 44.
42. Ibid., 15.
43. Ibid., 19–20.
44. Ibid., 44–5.
45. P. Engel, *Les lois de l'esprit. Julien Benda ou la raison* (Paris: Ithaque, 2012), 302.
46. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 20.
47. Müller, 'Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe', 129.
48. See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, new edition (London and New York: Verso, 2006). See on the matter also P. Cattani, 'Europe as a Nation? Intellectuals and Debate on Europe in the Inter-War Period', *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 6 (2017): 681.
49. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 41.
50. Ibid., 45–6.
51. Ibid., 46.
52. Ibid., 35–6.
53. Ibid., 57–58.
54. See Ibid., 50.
55. Ibid., 51.
56. Ibid., 100.
57. Ibid., 103–5.
58. Ibid., 109.
59. See Ibid., 110–11.
60. Ibid., 90–1.
61. See Ibid., 92–5.
62. See Ibid., 96–9.
63. Ibid., 119.
64. See Ibid., 118–19.
65. Ibid., 122.
66. See Ibid., 124–5. See what Cattani observes on the matter, 'Europe as a Nation?', 680.
67. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 125.
68. Müller, 'Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe', 133.
69. See Ibid., 125–7: 127.
70. Müller, 'Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe', 133.
71. P. Engel agrees on the point, but he also makes other considerations that cannot be deduced from the work's text ('Julien Benda's Thoughtful Europe', *The Monist* 92, no. 2 (2009), 317, 318).
72. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 77–8.

73. J. Benda, *Esquisse d'une histoire des français dans leur volonté d'être une nation* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1932).
74. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 8283.
75. *Ibid.*, 77–9.
76. *Ibid.*, 81.
77. See *Ibid.*, 79–80.
78. In addition to the following, see the notes on particular aspects, *Ibid.*, 131, 132, 140, 145.
79. *Ibid.*, 96.
80. *Ibid.*, 80.
81. *Ibid.*, 87.
82. *Ibid.*, 104.
83. See *Ibid.*, 98.
84. See *Ibid.*, 87–8.
85. *Ibid.*, 45.
86. See *Ibid.*, 18.
87. See *Ibid.*, 88.
88. See *Ibid.*, 103.
89. See *Ibid.*, 112.
90. Julien Benda's sentence resumes the epigraph at the first speech, taken from Spinoza's *Tractatus politicus* (*Discours à la nation européenne*, 13).
91. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 113.
92. See *Ibid.*, 115.
93. See *Ibid.*, 116–17.
94. See *Ibid.*
95. See *Ibid.*, 114.
96. See *Ibid.*, 115–16.
97. See *Ibid.*, 117.
98. See E. Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1882); now in *Œuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, Édition définitive établie par Henriette Psichari (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, vol. I, 1947), 888–906. On Renan's influence on Benda, in a broader comparative perspective, see Cattani, 'Europe as a nation?', 680–1.
99. Müller, 'Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe', 131.
100. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 107–8.
101. See *Ibid.*, 105–7. On the subject, in general, S. Teroni, *La passione della democrazia. Julien Benda* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1993).
102. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 59–61, 65–6.
103. See *Ibid.*, 67–71.
104. See *Ibid.*, 57–8.
105. See *Ibid.*, 84–6.
106. Engel, 'Julien Benda's Thoughtful Europe', 315.
107. A. Agnelli, 'Presentazione', in J. Benda, *Discorso alla nazione europea*, It. tr. by Renato Cristin (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), 7.
108. F. Perfetti, 'Review of "Julien Benda, "Discorso alla nazione europea"' (Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2013)', *Nuova Storia Contemporanea*, n. 5, 2015.
109. G. Bedeschi, 'Un'unità sempre necessaria', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 14 July 2013, 37.
110. Müller, 'Julien Benda's Anti-Passionate Europe', 130.
111. R. Nichols, *Treason, Tradition and the Intellectual. Julien Benda and Political Discourse* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), 129.
112. *Ibid.*, 130.
113. Engel, *Les lois de l'esprit*, 261.
114. Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 45–7: 46.
115. See *Ibid.*, 16.
116. See *Ibid.*, 18.
117. See *Ibid.*, 20.
118. *Ibid.*
119. See *Ibid.*, 21.
120. *Ibid.*
121. See D. Cadeddu, 'The Active Citizenship of Twentieth-Century Intellectuals: Reading Benda's "La Trahison des clercs"', in *Athenian Legacies. European Debates on Citizenship*, ed. P. Kitromilides (Firenze: Olschki, 2014), 413–23.
122. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 21.

123. Nichols, *Treason, Tradition and the Intellectual*, 129.
124. See J.R. Llobera, 'Visions of Europe in Dark Years: Julien Benda and José Ortega y Gasset', *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 1, no. 7 (1996): 2086. The same consideration also applies to the essay he recalled, Benda, *A Moral Program for Europe*.
125. See J. Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* (Paris: Grasset, 1975), 97–104.
126. See *Ibid.*, 104.
127. *Ibid.*, 190.
128. See Benda, *Discours à la nation européenne*, 21.
129. See *Ibid.*, 41.
130. See *Ibid.*, 56.
131. See *Ibid.*, 62–3.
132. See *Ibid.*, 73.
133. See *Ibid.*, 72.
134. *Ibid.*, 67.
135. *Ibid.*, 67.
136. Niess, *Julien Benda*, 167.
137. Weller, *The Idea of Europe*, 172. See also what Nichols observes in *Treason, Tradition and the Intellectual*, 214–42, note 45.
138. After attending two conferences organized in 1933 by the League of Nations in Madrid and Paris on the future of culture and the European spirit, 'some years after 1933 most of the books and articles in which he touched on international questions attacked the basic problem in similar fashion and, indeed, most of them are nothing more than expansions of points he had made in the *Discours*' (Niess, *Julien Benda*, 219). As is well known, in the immediate post-war period Julien Benda spoke on the subject, especially at the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*. However, Benda's argument was 'in large part, a repetition of the one that he had made in 1933. All that had really changed since then was the urgency of the need to establish a shared idea of Europe' (Weller, *The Idea of Europe*, 194).

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