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Dominique Moïsi

“Europe has become, for the younger generation,
a place to be and not a place to do”



Camunico in conversation with Dominique Moïsi, one of the world's leading geostrategic thinkers, on the state of Europe and the importance of culture and cultural identity.

Dominique Moïsi is a French political scientist and writer. He is the co-founder of the IFRI (Institut Français des Relations Internationales). He is also the Pierre Keller Visiting Professor at Harvard, the chairholder for Geopolitics at the College of Europe in Natolin, Warsaw, and a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

In addition to teaching he writes for the Financial Times, The New York Times, Die Welt and a range of other major newspapers.

He is the author of *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are reshaping the World*, which has been translated into more than 20 languages, and most recently, *Un Juif improbable*.

Mr Moïsi is married to the historian and writer Diana Pinto. They have two sons.

Camunico:

Your new book, *Un Juif improbable*, is your personal story about how you have become a convinced European. What are your current feelings about Europe? Are they emotions of fear or hope?

Mr. Moïsi:

Quite right I think to ask me this question first, because this morning in Amsterdam after my conference I went to see the Maritime Museum, which has just reopened. It is a beautiful museum, but what strikes me is that, at this particular juncture, the Dutch are in fact reassessing their national identity. What makes you Dutch? The sea, the maritime adventure. I had the same impression in Spain. Each country is on a kind of national ego trip.

The universal sport of Europeans is to visit each other. Europe has become a big collective museum where each club, like each city state of the renaissance, exercises its difference. And as I was watching this, I had the feeling that the book I have just published is my world of yesterday. What I am describing in my book is the birth of a very strong European emotion. The emotions I am describing, the process I am telling, it has simply disappeared.

The book will be a testimony to other generations about a world that is no longer there; the world of Franco-German reconciliation; the world of someone who feels very strongly and intensely that the only way he can live in Europe, after what happened, is as a European, and work for the reconciliation process in Europe. This generation succeeded. But the project disappeared with the accomplishment of its early goal and now no one is really European in a strong sense.

Camunico:

What about the political and economic situation in Europe?

Mr. Moïsi:

Right after 9/11 I remember the title of Le Monde: 'We are all Americans'. Today, no one would say we are all Greeks.

Americans feel American. They can say 'I am a Texan', but they know that beyond that they are Americans. When they say 'In God we trust' on the dollar bill it invokes something strong; that combination of religious nationalism that makes America so resilient. If you go to Ground Zero you will see the resilience of America. It is a very moving site with two huge fountains at the sides of the destroyed towers and the new tower built by Libeskind, the man who did the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which is really a tower of resilience; the triumph of the culture of life against the culture of death.

All Euro notes are united by bridges. If you move back to Europe from the United States, the bridge on all Euro notes seems to be leading nowhere. People have thought about it but it did not work. In fact, if I wanted to make a bad joke, I would say that the equivalent of 'In God we trust' would be 'In Europe we do not trust'. This is what is happening today in the markets, and so the feeling I had entering the Maritime Museum in Amsterdam was, well, it is another period.

Nationalism is back with a vengeance.

It is partly linked to the process of globalisation. In a world of interdependency and transparency you want to be reassured, and what will reassure you is a link with yourself. And so the Dutch will look at both: the sea, the conquests of the territory. In fact, you look for reasons to be proud of your difference with the other.

Camunico:

What should be done to strengthen that sense of cultural heritage and cultural identity in Europe, particularly with a view to younger generations? Should there be more initiatives and guidance from the European Commission?

Mr. Moïsi:

But the European Commission... there is no spirit there. I do not see Barroso resuscitating a great sense of European culture, especially not now.

Camunico:

Would you say that *Un Juif improbable* is looking forwards as well as backwards?

Mr. Moïsi:

When I wrote *The Geopolitics of Emotion*, what struck people was the dedication of the book to my father who went through an enormous amount of humiliation and fear to teach me hope. It touched people. I think *The Geopolitics of Emotion* has been translated into 24 languages and everybody has asked me about this. At some point the idea came naturally to me that I was going to tell the story of my father. I wanted to explain to my readers the geopolitics of *my* emotions. As a professor I have always started my classes by telling my students where my values came from. *Un Juif improbable* is about my formative years, it stops at 30. It rests on two quests: affiliation and identity. My story is a bit particular and I wanted to share it with my readers because I was convinced that with the rise of populism and intolerance in Europe it was important to transmit a message of tolerance. You can add very complex identities as long as you have very clear values. This is one of two key messages in the book. The other message is that where you come from is important, but where you want to go is even more important.

In my case, I am the son of a survivor of Auschwitz, but also of a mother who converted to Catholicism before I was born in the early 1930s. So to be Jewish was, for me, a choice. A choice which was logical given my name, but a choice that was also logical given the history of my father. He had survived very improbable odds. Out of the large amount of Jews that were sent to the camps during the war only a few returned, and he was quite old when he returned. He had no child and one of the reasons which he told me was very important in his will to survive is that he wanted to have a son. So I felt a sense of admission, of continuity, and I was not to interrupt what Hitler failed to destroy.

Camunico:

Initially after the war the European initiatives were of a cultural nature. The current European process has become explosively economic. How have we lost the broader dimensions?

Mr. Moïsi:

I think that it is partly linked to the personality process. Europe very early on has become bureaucratic. In order to believe in Europe you have to never set foot in Brussels, never to enter the European Parliament, the European Commission or the European presidency, because if you do, you can see the divorce between your dreams and the reality.

I remember a conversation I had with Jacques Delors when I was working for him at the Commission. At some point he became mad at me, really mad because I had suggested that if we were not to create a European emotion, a European patriotism, national emotions would return with a vengeance. He was furious. He replied: "Patriotism means war. I am not a European to return to that".

War amongst us has become unthinkable and that is the great achievement of Europe, but that is to some extent the only achievement of Europe in real terms. It has become a grey, impersonal, bureaucratic process and I think national governments bear a huge responsibility for that. They have chosen the leaders of Europe according to their limits instead of selecting them according to their merits. They wanted to make sure that they had no rival and they succeeded beyond their dreams. But as they succeeded Europe has lost incarnation. It has grey flesh. Intellectuals are kept at bay.

Camunico:

Is this bureaucracy just an institutional matter or is this also a matter of this age and time in which we are living?

Mr. Moïsi:

Well, I think we have to start by changing the narrative of Europe. It is very difficult. For a long time the narrative was that it was negative to be European and to make sure that there would be no new war between European countries, that the Soviet Union would not invade us, and then we tried to surf on a positive narrative and it did not work. We failed to create one and now there is a negative narrative again and that is that. What is in front of us is the sheer marginalisation of Europe in the world. If we are no longer an actor, we are not going to be seen as a model for long and our fate will be in the hands of others.

If you want to build that new narrative it may be that culture is essential in the sense that you have to convince Europeans that this is what you have to defend if you do not want to be totally marginalised. And what you have to defend is the luxury that you have, which makes you unique in the world.

You take a train in Europe and in one hour you meet a different culture, a different language. In America it does not exist. In Asia it is much more difficult. So we have that wealth of diversity that makes us all richer as Europeans. But the slogan unity and diversity did not work. We forgot about unity and we just emphasised diversity, but diversity in a way not as superior. I do not think the Italians are coming to see Italian paintings in Dutch museums to say 'you see it is better than Dutch paintings'.

No, they come to admire Rembrandt, Van Gogh and others. But as they leave, do they say to themselves, what a great thing to be a European? To have access to all of that?

Camunico:

If we are talking about the narrative, 'no more war' is probably not very inspiring for younger generations because they have history books. You are saying that the narrative should be 'what a wealth we have in this part of the world'. What can be done about creating that narrative?

Mr. Moïsi:

Well, it is very difficult. In Europe there is nowhere a museum of European art, simply because all art that is contained in a museum is perceived as European. And that is the problem. In a way, Europe is an evidence, an absolute evidence and no longer a project. No longer an ambition. How do you recreate a political project? Clearly we are failing and it is not culture that is going to make people believe in Europe. Culture is not the answer to politics but politics needs art, and artists need sometimes a positive environment.

Camunico:

Ex-commissioner Frits Bolkestein has just recently written a book in which he says that the West, in particular Europe, suffers from a lack of trust and confidence in its own culture. Now is this a European issue or is this also an issue of national European countries?

Mr. Moïsi:

I would say that we suffer from overconfidence as much as a lack of confidence.

Overconfidence in a sense that we have lost the curiosity to learn about other countries, and this is the subject of my next book. I am trying to see what it can mean for the West to live in a post-Western world. What does it mean when you are only 10% of the world population? When you are only 30% of world wealth? When other civilizations have more energy than yourself? When the very meaning of the West is in doubt because the West has lost its unity? You have an American West that has little to do with the European West. The West has lost its specificity because of globalisation, and the West has lost its centrality.

When it comes to culture, I think we came to believe that we will have a monopoly on universalism forever. Can we reconsider ourselves in a world where we have to learn from others? Here I am fascinated. That is why I go and look at all museum exhibits.

They are for me a pleasure but they are also working instruments because each exhibit tells me something about the intercultural dialogue.

Camunico:

What is your view on cultural exhibitions that aim to reflect on a world often threatened by tension and self-withdrawal and that approach identity, not based upon an affirmation of nationality or origins, but rather upon the way that one constructs relations with “the other”?

Mr. Moïsi:

What are exhibitions? What is the message in emotional and identity terms an exhibition carries?

I have an incredible experience I want to share with you. It was in 1998 in London. I had gone to the National Portrait Gallery and there was an exhibit called something like Black Faces of Success and you could see photographs of black people who had succeeded in British society; judges, lawyers, intellectual business men. I bought the catalogue and I left it in my hotel and one evening I entered my room and the maid was there, sitting in the salon of my room, fascinated by the catalogue. She barely heard me entering. She was a black maid from Jamaica. She had never seen or heard of that and I think the catalogue changed her life in the sense that she could associate with those people, many of them coming from Jamaica becoming a Lord, Baroness etc. For me this is the maximum an exhibit can create.

Camunico:

You have written about hope in your previous book; that hope is necessary to progress as a human being, the impossibility of survival without hope. Historically, hope is closely related to religion and now in Europe religion is very much on the retreat. Do you believe that culture and the arts can replace religion as a source of hope?

Mr. Moïsi:

No. To put it bluntly, no. Culture cannot replace transcendence and spirituality but it can lead you there. I am not religious in the sense that I do not obey the rules of Judaism. But at the same time the presence of God in my life is a great source of strength and hope. That is a very personal answer.

The belief in something that goes beyond men allows men to go beyond themselves in terms of creativity.

An obvious example is the building of the cathedral. It is a great banality but I think the lack of spirituality is one of the great weaknesses of Europe today. And it goes deep at many levels. I think that the men who built the cathedral for the church, or for the King for that matter, had a sense of pride in their work that was essential for the happiness and the stability of society. We have lost that completely. There is not enough appetite like in the emerging countries and there is not enough pride. We have to reconcile people with work, with labour, with the achievement, with their deeds. I mean, there is that obsession with the retirement age which comes as a result of the fact that work is unsatisfactory. There is no pride any longer in what you are doing and so you want that phase of your life to be over as quickly as possible. And this is absurd. So rehabilitation of labour, the craft of the artisan is one of the fundamental elements, I think, for our societies.

Camunico:

What is the potential of culture to function as a primary source of national and local identity?

Mr. Moïsi:

Where is national identity? I think that that is the problem when it comes to art. In the past there was a French school of painting, a Dutch school of painting, a British school of painting. Today, what is striking is the anonymously universal character of art, a certain dehumanisation of art. Maybe I am too conservative. I mean, videos, games. I mean you see through art a very silicon world, a very depressed world. A world expecting the worst. What is the next catastrophe? There is not much hope in modern art.

Camunico:

What can you give us as hope as Europeans?

Mr. Moïsi:

Well we still have the best social model in the world. We still have the most balanced system in the world. The problem is that Europe has become, for the younger generation, a place to be and not a place to do, and this has to be changed. And the message I give these days is that Europe needs first to accept the inevitability of change. We are no longer the centre of humanity. Europe must understand the nature of change.

A long historical cycle is closing in front of us and Europe must adjust to change and adjusting to change means readdressing a very dangerous imbalance. For the last 10 years or more we have been living well beyond our means materially and well below our means intellectually, spiritually, ethically. This has to be reversed and culture plays an important role in the re-balancing of that.



Dominique Moïsi was talking to Peter Idenburg and Ron Soonieus of Camunico

