



Praise of US Universities. They preserve the memory in the fragile country

The choice to defend culture in a land that destroys and rebuilds everything

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In flight, at night, in a sultry cabin, I hold in my hands a diary of Albert Camus on his trip to America in 1946. On the first night of the journey, the French writer is in a ship's cabin with several bunks. And he's panicked. "I have the impression of breathing the breath of others and I feel a furious desire to go to sleep on the bridge." But the cold dissuades him. He buries himself in his little bed with War and peace in his hand, "as I would have been in love with Natacha!" He writes desolate. The journey, every journey, whether by ship or plane, is a small, uncomfortable adventure within a time and space that there are strangers and sometimes hostile. Do we go forward or backward? And what does it mean to find yourself with a body that tenaciously preserves a temporal memory different from the one in which we find ourselves breathing and walking? And yet here I am walking through the snowy paths of an American university, aware that the beating heart of all this knowledge lies in a building from the imposing air, of vague Athenian style, called Library and is a library. In a country that bases its culture on mobility and the provisional, it affects and moves the care that the universities dedicate to a memory conquered with difficulty and kept alive with loving care.

Everything in this America speaks of fragility and mobility. The houses made of wood and cardboard that a strong wind is enough to send them to the air like a house of cards, entire neighborhoods of campers parked on the uneven ground, ready to move as soon as necessary, to the north or south. A nomadic country by vocation and by necessity, in which each person is about to move, for work, for love, for vocation. A country that makes the automobile its home, taking with it everything, from the cradle of the child to the dog kennel, from the mobile refrigerator to the television. Ready to stand in line, without leaving the car's interior, to pay a bank account, to watch an outdoor movie, or to grab a sandwich and a coffee, directly served by a young woman in shirt sleeves,

Universities are the great conservatives of a culture that wants to be universal and stable, perhaps even omnipotent. Fragably omnipotent though, because in that same power lies the awareness of a disturbing frailty. Yet no one escapes the difficult task of defending the privilege of conservation, in a land where everything is quickly destroyed and rebuilt without regret for the past. In the universities that carry prestigious names like Princeton, Cornell, Wheaton, Ithaca, Mount Holyoke, Holy Cross, time is stopped and fixed to the wall, in the form of posters announcing conferences, meetings, presentations, exhibitions, cultural events of all kinds.

The six universities I have named are the very ones I was invited to in this part of a cold and windy winter. Fortunately the wind storms ar over when I arrive, but the piles of dirty snow are still there to remember the furious snowfalls, the tangled traffic, the canceled flights, the closed schools, the water and the light skipped, the fallen trees. I met hundreds of students who speak Italian and know everything about Italian literature, cinema and music. I met hundreds of others, who although not speaking Italian, are interested in our past and our present.

The average American citizen is generally ignorant of the world. He often doesn't even know where Italy is. But as soon as you set foot in a university, everything becomes clear and farsighted. Machiavelli and Dante are friends to question, Natalia Ginzburg and Anna Maria Ortese are friends whose writings are consulted.

And here I am at Holy Cross University talking about maps with the Canadian Mark Abley, the Indian Gupi Ranganathan and the English Harry Stuart, who, with sweet impassiveness, reveals to us that maps are almost never an objective definition of reality, but an interpretation of the world. In short, the cartography is relative, says Stuart laboriously turning his bandaged head - the old professor fell slipping on the ice and was in the hospital where they put him ten points -, does not establish truth but establishes rules.

The students are fascinated. But they will be even more so when an Italian butcher, Andrea Falaschi, will show them the map of a quartered pork body: head, shoulder, scamerita, arista, fillet, bacon, bacon, ham, with relative cooking methods. Who knows what Chatwi would have said about the natives of Australian natives singing! The Indian Gupi, who is a painter, shows us instead the maps of the memory of a grandmother suffering from Alzheimer's. Tangles of thoughts, images, frayed and lost in a dark sky.

Mark Abley asks for provocation: but who do you think sets the boundaries in the maps? The cartographer, or the politicians who win wars? And it remembers the territories of the Native Americans, the maps of the reserves that continually lost territories of which the conquerors appropriated.

As I tell of my journey as a child drawn by the affectionate hand of a very young mother, the maps of the sky come to mind. Many stars, cataloged, linked to each other by a mythological design. Those stars that I admired, very clear and solid like precious stones sown in the dark, while I stood nose up on the deck of the ship. But who takes into account the depths? And of that black mystery which is time?

My journey among the wise American universities, where I meet lovable and cultured people, conquered by Italy, ends up at New York University, where I find myself talking about Chiara of Assisi with the medieval scholar Jane Tylus, who wrote a book about Catherine of Siena and knows everything about our so-called dark centuries, which are not at all dark but full of luminous contradictions. "Do they have anything to tell us about these mystics today?" Asks a girl from the audience. Maybe yes. In a market climate, in which everything is sold and bought, in which possession reveals and gives value to the person, the call to evangelical poverty, sobriety, creatureal commiseration seems very actual. Just think of the increasingly frequent practice of very young girls who sell their bodies, as if it were a small thing for nothing, a property to be contracted for a dish of lentils. And can't it be that another practice, that of fasting, today called anorexia, can be interpreted as the rejection of a widespread mentality that humiliates and humiliates the very idea of a happy body?

New York seems to me vulgar, all aimed at mass tourism, strewn with shops with crude gadgets, manufactured in China; increasingly plastered with blow-ups of the female body that promise erotic dreams linked to some economic enterprise: the purchase of a shiny and powerful machine, a visit to a supermarket, participation in an event. And if you turn on the television you are attacked by a river of image of people shooting: day, night, from one car to another, inside a school, on the streets of a peaceful city, at an airport, in a station.

Everyone shoots, even children. Only sometimes a generous young man turns into a flying body, complete with a blue and red mask and

overalls. Fly to save a girl who is about to be crushed by a steel monster bursting with sparks of fire. The girl, Yet this is the land of meritocracy. Perhaps the greatest virtue in times of corruption. A virtue continually threatened by large lobbies, such as arms, energy or banks. Stefano Vaccara, an Italian journalist who lives in New York, has written a book (Editori Internazionali Uniti) to show that it was the mafia of New Orleans, of Sicilian origin, namely Carlos Marcello, a very powerful and astute capomafia, who had killed the two Kennedy brothers, because they had made up their mind to clean up America from organized crime that corrupted police officers and judges.

Universities are kept away from these horrors. And they defend the practice of meritocracy with their nails and teeth. Because they have understood that the secret of development lies in the ability to use brains, of whatever color they come from, wherever they come from, male or female, it doesn't matter, Christians or Muslims is fine, provided they enter the system. Even knowing that, once inside, they can also try to break it up. But the risk is worth the candle and the wealth that derives from it, is good for everyone.

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