

Myth and spirit of Geneva

It would strike anyone looking back at the history of Geneva: actors of this history have been animated by a solid spirit of independence and freedom, a trust in humanity and a vision of a universal mission of Geneva in the world. This was present in the struggle against the Duke of Savoy in the XVI and XVII century, the development of International Committee of the Red Cross, notwithstanding the famous night of the Escalade. These three elements, - a spirit of independence and freedom, this trust in humankind and the vision of universal mission for Geneva are the core elements of the spirit of Geneva as defined by Robert de Traz in 1929.

But this *spirit*, that includes the essential part of the Geneva identity, appears as the ultimate form, or the last metamorphosis of what is to be called the *Myth of Geneva*. There is indeed a myth, in the sorelian sense, a representation of reality through which the world is transfigured and which contributes to the mobilization of actors and of the crowds, a driving idea that commands or provides direction to history.

The existence of this myth is confirmed by the vision of the city developed by many key contributors to the life of the city, from Calvin to Jean Targaut, in the XVI century, from Rousseau, d'Alembert and Sismondi in the XVIII and XIX centuries, or Albert Thomas, Drieu La Rochelle or R. de Traz in the XX century. The myth of Geneva exists aside from other driving ideas such as the notion of Empire, or organizational models such as the Roman republic, the Swiss federalism or the British Monarchy.

There is indeed a true myth of Geneva, an ideal representation of the city which contributes to galvanizing energies, mobilizing xxx peoples and their leaders, and finally inspiring many institutions. This myth is however not bound by the notion of a protestant Rome. This is merely the first expression of this myth.

This is what I shall explain here. I will rely on work of commentators and historians and present some further explorations. My sources include Robert de Traz in his *Esprit de Genève* published in 1929 along with the historian Raffaello Ramat and his great book *Sismondi and the myth of Geneva* in 1936. I will also refer to the eminent contribution of my homynous? Alain Dufour and his scientific study on *the Myth of Geneva in the times of Calvin*.

I shall dwell somehow on the different forms of the Myth of Geneva, and especially the typical ones and I will try to capture the revealing indices along with elements of continuity and rupture, but most interestingly on the characteristic components.

What is the different form of the Myth of Geneva along the centuries? We could distinguish three of them. The myth of Geneva only appears in modern times, and symptomatically, at the same time as the myth of Moscow – the third Rome. There is a parallelism. Constantinople, the Second Rome, fell in the hands of the Turks in the middle of the XVth century, and lost its domination over the Eastern Christianity and found a relay in the orthodox world with the growing influence of Moscow, the third Rome. In the same way, in the Latin world, the first Rome is contested by the Reformers

and lost the power to direct western Christianity. It is then relayed by Geneva, the Protestant Rome.

Now, if the myth of Geneva only appears during the modern times, at the time of the religious explosion of the Latin Christianity in the West, the myth of Geneva is not restricted to the Protestant Rome. We have there, in a sort of quasi-messianic atmosphere, the first form of the myth of Geneva. Then, two other forms of rather different natures appear.

We will therefore explore three forms of the myth of Geneva: first in the XVIth and XVIIth century, *the myth of Geneva, Protestant Rome, Citadel of the Faith and New Jerusalem*. Then in the XVIIIth and XIXth century, *the myth of Geneva – Enlightened republic, advanced post of the Enlightenment* (Sismondi) and lastly, in the XXth century, the myth of Geneva, *Bastion of freedom and tolerance. Capital of the Nations, International city*.

I

Let us dwell first on the myth of Geneva-the Protestant Rome, Citadel of Faith. This is probably the most renowned form of the myth. The first indication of a process of mythicizing Geneva can be found among the actors of the Reform movement both in Geneva and Zurich. Pastors of Zurich who were trying to convince Jean Calvin, who had then taken refuge in Strasbourg, to respond positively to the appeal of the Genevian authorities wrote on April 5, 1541 and designated Geneva as a future and potential metropolis of faith.

But the most significant sign of this process of mythicizing Geneva in the XVIth century is provided by Calvin himself in 1552. It calls Geneva a new City of God in Europe. Calvin writes to the faithful of the reformed French community in London, on September 1552. He refers to a comparison between Geneva and Jerusalem. This comparison is one of the core elements of the first myth of Geneva.

In the XVIIth century, the expression *the Protestant Rome* seems to appear for the first time. Geneva, before being the city of Calvin, is lived and dreamed as a holy city, a New Jerusalem. This is derived less from the prediction of Calvin himself than from the enthusiasm of its first foreign adepts.

This way the first myth of Geneva is shaped as holy city, New Jerusalem, city of refuge. It articulates a national component, nourished by a spirit of independence, a religious component, referring to a confessing and messianic vision, to the new people of God, formed by the elected of all nations.

This myth is attested to by an Italian, former Italian capuchin, Bernardino Ochion (1487-1564), and former General of his congregation, and then later a member of the Reform. He describes Geneva in 1542 with great enthusiasm and concludes his description by saying that Geneva is like a picture of the eternal life. A parallel description is drawn by John Bale (1495-1563). Finally, we can mention Jean Tagaut (1530-1560).

In a Latin poem to the glory of the New Jerusalem, and explicitly addressed “*Ad Senatam Populumque gebennensem*” in 1559, this humanist attributes to Geneva the vestments of the heavenly City of the book of Apocalypse. He celebrated the legions of angels who surround and care for its integrity. He also praised its land, rich and fertile, irrigated by abundant waters.

This first form of the myth of Geneva imposed itself in the middle of XVI century. Geneva is transfigured into a New Jerusalem and integrates various national components, nourished by the spirit of independence of the city and referring to its religious dimension. This myth exalts the new people of God, bringing together the Elect of all nations and the people of the City, born within its walls, and freed from the servitude of Rome Babylon and the Duchy of Savoy, the long-lasting enemy.

II

The second form of the myth of Geneva presents itself with a very different formulation at the end of the XVIIIth century. It is the myth of *Geneva – enlightened republic, advanced post of the Enlightenment, bastion of freedom*: it is best expressed in the article “Genève” of the 7th tome of the *Encyclopedie* of 1757. It was written by d’Alembert. It finds an echo in the works of Sismondi in the beginning of the XIXth century.

The first signs which reveal this new myth of Geneva are provided by letters and narratives from foreign travellers. They provide also its principle components which bear three different dimensions: intellectual, political and religious.

We shall restrain ourselves to the witness of foreigners from the late XVIIIth century before we dwell on some of the classical texts, which contributed to form and transmit this new myth of Geneva. These are the Dedicace of the Second Discourse of Rousseau (1741) and the Considerations on Geneva from Sismondi (1814).

As for the witness of foreign visitors to the Geneva, one of the most significant seems to be Amable Robin (1739-1807), chevalier of la Tremblaie, member of the Order of Malta.

In his description, he noted the level of education of the citizens, the wisdom of the political regime and the philosophical spirit of religion. All classes of citizens are well educated. The political regimes bring together the advantages of both aristocracy and democracy. As for religion, everyone is entitled to decide his faith on his intelligence. The philosophical spirit of Geneva is open to all virtues, from all times and all religions.

These new elements are best expressed in the works of Rousseau, d’Alembert and Sismondi which constitute the new canon of this second myth. Rousseau stated:

The more I reflect on your Political and Civil situation, the less can I imagine that the nature of human things could admit of a better...For you, your happiness is complete; you have only to enjoy it.

More than Rousseau who will later on revise his own judgement, it is the article of Jean Le Rond d’Alembert (1717-1783) devoted to Geneva in 1757, in the 7th tome of the *Encyclopédie* which exemplifies the new myth of the Geneva-Enlightened republic,

model of openness and bastion of freedom. In his study of the intellectual history of the new myth (?) in Modern Europe, the eight column article dwells on the political regime which articulates both an executive and a legislative branch. At the intellectual level, he contributes to disseminate the idea of Geneva of very culture. *“All the sciences and almost all the arts have been so well cultivated in Geneva that one would be surprised to see the list of scholars and artists of all kinds produced by the city during the last two centuries”*. At the religious level, d’Alembert noted the high level of moral commitment of the clergy: *The clergy of Geneva have exemplary morals. The ministers live in great concord. One does not see them, as in other countries, quarrelling bitterly among themselves about unintelligible subjects, persecuting each other, and accusing each other in unseemly fashion before the magistrates.*

This new myth of Geneva will be amplified by Jean Charles Leonard Sismondi (1773-1842) in the XIX century. He pleaded in 1814 for the restoration of the independence of Geneva for the good of Europe. He presents Geneva as an English city on the Continent and an advanced post for its political and religious lights. *Geneva has been on the continent the champion of both civil and religious freedom.*

This new myth of Geneva brings together a new intellectual component, from the Enlightenment – and a political component, and an original religious component, a sort of Christian deism, rational, tolerant, Universalist: the religion of Geneva. In its complexity, this new form of the myth of Geneva will impose on the collective consciousness the image of an open city, of progress, of freedom and of universal tolerance. It will become a substitute to the traditional image of the citadel of the Faith and the City of Refuge.

III

Let us now turn to the third form of the myth of Geneva: the myth of Geneva, capital of all Nations, international city of Peace, Temple for humanitarian commitments.

This new myth reveals significant mutations in the political and religious domains.

As for the signs that reveal its emergence, they can be found in recurrent expression of the 20s: “Either Geneva or Moscow”, an expression that can be found in writings as different as those from Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1895-1945) and Albert Thomas (1878-1932).

In his book “Geneva or Moscow”, Drieu La Rochelle calls on European capitalism to respect its social responsibilities. Geneva is presented as an alternative to an apocalyptic Moscow.

This alternative is also to be found in Albert Thomas discourses during the foundation of the ILO. “One has said, abusively either Geneva or Moscow. Two words cannot be sufficient to solve the difficult problem of the entire world destroyed by war”.

“Either Geneva or Moscow”, this refers to two antagonistic symbols: the universalization of the pacific regulation of conflicts or of the Bolshevik revolution with its global dimension. These two symbols oppose negotiation and the federative organization of the world to the bloody class struggles raised to a level of global dimensions, with its

genocides forgotten by human justice if not erased from humankind memory. It is striking to note this myth of Geneva appears simultaneous with the third avatar of the myth of the third Rome, which converts Moscow into the capital city of worker of the whole world, the capital of the proletariat and of the class struggle in its global dimension.

The principal components of this new myth are best expressed by Robert de Traz in his book *L'esprit de Genève*.

A significant shift appears now in this Geneva of the Nations, international city for Peace. One does ask: "what is your faith? But "what are your sufferings?" Its political component is contemporary to the development of the Red Cross, the NGOs and the League of Nations. Its liberal political component becomes global federalism; its religious component becomes humanitarian. The religion of Man has superseded the one of the God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers. Human rights have taken the place of God rights. Humanitarian rights the place of ecclesiastical ordinances.

This third myth is commonly designated as the Spirit of Geneva. According to Robert de Traz, in his most famous essay, it can be summarized as a "*desire of emancipation and ecumenism, a trust in mankind as long as human beings accepts rules, a belief in contracts, a deep curiosity for ideas and peoples, a compassion toward all the miseries along with a need to invent, improve and administer with method*".

But what this author does best is to describe the development of this *Spirit of Geneva*. "*The very name of Geneva, shining above all particular meaning, is facing the strange adventure of becoming itself a symbol*".