

Dr. Erhard Busek

The role of culture in forming a common Europe

We always can read and hear: culture is the basis of Europe, without culture you can't understand the old continent and so on. In reality we are talking now in Europe about currency-systems and mad beef, unemployment and new technologies, immigration and security. Culture is only for the exhibitions, festivals and for tourism. This is a pity in respect to the role the culture has to play in the new Europe. Isn't it a fact that, since 1989, Europe has cooperated closely in the fields of economics, transportation, natural sciences and technology? The ultimate structure of the European Union seems a much more urgent question than the definition of the role allocated to the humanities and culture – as are security issues in Europe under the new conditions. It might therefore seem better to discuss the future of NATO, the Western European Union, the OSCE and other organizations. But the Balkans and the Dayton Conference an Agreement show, how vital culture is for the protection of human rights and the mutual understanding. History and law are the basis for the development of constitutions, human rights and international law and therefore imperative for the future of Europe. Ethnic cleansing and the violation of peace and democracy are crucial problems for the Old World. I am convinced that the situation on the Balkan is not the only crisis we will have to face as a consequence of the upheavals of 1989. The volatile situation on the Caucasus and in Russia as well as the complexity of the borders are all problems we will have

to face in the near future. All these issues are certainly an enormous challenge for the humanities and culture.

In 1989, the general impression was that the major difficulty following the Velvet Revolution was to reinstitute free market economy and a fair social system. We all recall the saying: It is easier to make a fish soup out of an aquarium than to make an aquarium out of fish soup. Since then the developments in the new democracies show that these problems are manageable. The bigger issue is that an ideological political system has robbed the citizens in these countries of their biography and their natural identity. One of the consequences is a loss of humanistic tradition at the universities, schools and in the perception of the public. The situation differs from country to country. It is impossible to say that one part of Europe is better than the other. We must also face the fact that Western Europe has also lost touch with the humanities. Instead of an exchange of ideas, the immediate reaction to the changes in Central and Eastern Europe was merely the extension of Western consumerism.

Carlo Mongardini, Professor at the "La Sapienza" University of Rome, put his finger on it by defining social life as a balance between the market place and the temple. The market place is democracy as it has developed since Athens and its Agora. It stands for economy, competition and public life but also for populism. But the temple is also necessary. It represents stability of ideas, the high status of thought and creativity, the value and importance of culture, etc. It seems to me that in the West, despite

all the freedom we enjoy, the temple is empty.

"Anything goes", said Paul Feyerabend, countering Sir Karl Popper. But in reality, pluralism brought us to the social end of enlightenment. In every situation we need to use the word "post": post-modernism, postcommunism, post-enlightenment, post-Christianity, post-academic science and so on. It is therefore desperately necessary to discuss the situation. Is a new Europe possible without culture? I myself cannot give a definitive answer, but I can and will present you with a few ideas:

Seen in historical perspective, the humanities and culture are not in crisis from a purely quantitative point of view. Never before in European history have so many people devoted their professional lives to humanist scholarship, history, language and literature, political science and philosophy, cultural studies and sciences. Student enrollment in the humanities still ranks very high, creating a much larger pool of humanists than the professional market will be able to absorb. The mass-medias are full about reports of cultural events, festivals and exhibitions. The production of CDs and TV-programs is increasing, entertainment is everything.

Why then is there so much concern about the role and the cultural significance of the humanities? Why is there so much despair and depression among the writers, artists and professors? Why the constant and at the same time rather fatuous debate on the functional role of the humanities in modern systems of education and scholarship? I shall try to provide some provisional analytical answers:

1.) Institutional marginalization: Mass higher education has significantly changed the institutional role of culture and the humanities – in no sense are they the spiritual and intellectual center of our education anymore. They are an appendix of vocationally oriented education establishments aimed at riling the market. They also seem to be institutional victims of the glorious success story of the natural sciences which have gained so much economic and political influence through their very worldly impact on industry, economy, everyday life and also the realm of the arts.

2.) Loss of advisory capacity: Since the 1960s, the political and institutional advisory role of culture and the humanities has been taken over by social and economic sciences oriented primarily on the quantitative and mathematical natural sciences (physics as standard model of proper science) than according to the discursive patterns of the sciences de lettre.

3.) Cultural hegemony: Ever since the encyclopedic philosophers (Diderot, d' Alembert) of the French Enlightenment, humanists have played quite a crucial role in deriving the political mission and cultural supremacy of Europe. They heralded the message of universal reason and morality and thereby created very influential *grand narratives* paraphrasing the themes of cultural identity, the legalizing justice of free market economy, the cognitive supremacy of Western science and technology, and the rational virtues of liberal democracy.

After WW II, in the sixties and seventies especially, the *grand narratives* diminished into something now called the 'post-modern condition of man' (Lyotard), reflected in self-critical accounts of the Western model of reasoning and political ethics labeled post-modernism.

4.) Public disappearance of intellectuals: The modern public role of the intellectual as a moral and critical figure began with Emile Zola's criticism of the French authorities and the anti-Semitic Dreyfuss trial. It somehow ended in the aftermath of Solidarnosc and the Velvet Revolution. Ethnic genocide in Bosnia was not a moral and socially critical agenda of the intellectuals anymore, but a subject of the post-modern discourse of the electronic media without humanist connotation. Humanities and culture are not anymore the rational underpinning of public intellectuals making a plea against genocide and ethnic slaughter and arguing in favor of more just and peaceful societies. The vacancy left by the disappearing voices of critical intellectuals and artists is now occupied by the non-theoretical and non-critical images of TV cameras. Speedy images have replaced the discourse of dedicated individuals of high moral esteem, isolated bits of information have replaced elaborated and contextualized claims of morality and rational argument.

5.) Decline of philosophy: Since Kant and Hegel, since Marx and Nietzsche, since Andre Malraux and Jean Paul Sartre, European philosophers have used the humanist tradition as a powerful source of public criticism and rational evaluation of the progress of man. This tradition has been dissolved not only because the grand

narratives of social criticism (Marxist Tradition) have lost credibility and legitimacy but also because the idea of rational man as the embodiment of the ideas of the Enlightenment and systematic philosophy (Cartesian identity of man) disappeared into a pluralistic concept of differing cultures, ethnicities and gender.

Why do we need culture as a common basis for Europe?

What could be the new scholarly and discursive role of the humanities today? Does the "new Europe" still require the kind of intellectual expertise traditionally produced and provided by culture? Let me draw some indicative perspectives:

1.) Compensatory function of philosophy and humanist thinking:

Odo Marquard, a German philosopher, argued in favor of a compensatory role of the humanities when facing Max Weber's modern world of the rationalistic disenchantment of our lives and the very earthly consequences of secularization as promoted by the European Enlightenment. Without doubt, his idea is interesting and somehow appealing. It seems to provide a new spiritual home for our puzzled and often cynical minds. But personally I think that, although nice and respectable when seen on its own, the concept cannot work for two reasons:

(1) The very directly felt disenchantment over the shortcomings of modern society, cultural alienation, crude urban life ecology problems and the widespread feeling of social and cultural fragmentarity and political and economic crisis cannot be healed by

philosophy humanist thoughts and cultural events. On the contrary, it will be displaced by appropriate political and social action, by creating new frameworks for living, working, democratic participation and cultural life. Philosophy should not compensate or even substitute politics – this could be a much too dangerous road into the future.

(2) The consequences of secularization – alienating for many – cannot be compensated by aesthetics, philosophy or cognitive narratives. The problem of religion still remains to be solved. One of the most serious shortcomings of the Enlightenment was the confusion of the question of religious needs and desires with the question of the appropriate institutional and political role of religion within secular societies. Although for a long time it looked like the first question has disappeared today, it is re-emerging and gaining significance as indicated by the popularity of new age movements and religious sects. To speak about God is necessary, to explain the history of the world, because salvation is one of the great desire of the mankind, you can read in Russian literature.

So what else could be the new role culture? In my view we do not have to search for complete answers and strategies. A lot of rethinking and reorientation is already in process.

Rethinking Modernity & the Enlightenment: One of the fruitful results of the so-called postmodernist debate in the human sciences is the rethinking of modernity and Enlightenment. What does this mean? Stimulated by the philosophy of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Bourdieu as well as Zygmunt Bauman's account of

the ambivalence of modernity we are now ready to view modern European history from the 16th and 17th century onward as an ambivalent and beneficial but very costly way into modernity, characterized by the ideas of nation-state, rational science, centralized bureaucracy, enlightened legalization of minorities and ethnic groups and capitalist mass-production and consumption. This type of society modernization has been a tremendous success. But despite all the Messings of modern society it has also produced social, economic and sexual discrimination, the abolition of marginal cultures, aggressive colonialism and the destruction of nature. Most seriously, European modernity brought forth two world wars, Hitler's Holocaust, Stalin's communist terror and the Balkan genocide of the 1990s.

Faced with the post-modern condition of man – characterized not only by the loss of the moral message of the Enlightenment but also by the disappearance of key ideas such as cultural identity, rational progress and universal justice, we must seriously ask ourselves why the path to modernity has created the negative dialectic of the 20th century and which alternative route we may anticipate for the future.

This complex bundle of issues is not the exclusive property of physicists, economists, chaos theoreticians and artificial intelligence researchers, it is also – and very much so – an issue for those committed to the humanities and humanist discourse. Let me formulate some key questions for culture and the human sciences not only of scholarly importance but also with political connotations and implications:

Do we still require an "identity" in the self-reflection of modernity and the cultural narratives of Western civilization? Should we not give up identity in favor of true global socio-cultural plurality? By this I mean the diversity of historical, political and social patterns of cultural practices and ideas. Do we have the right to value our culture more than other cultures? Should we not abandon the politics of exclusion tightly linked to the ideas of the Enlightenment in favor of a cultural concept that fosters the understanding of how the foreigner we fear so much can also be found in ourselves? Let us start in Europe, because Europe means variety at first, in which you can find the unity of the basic ideas of mankind.

Do we really require a concept of culture modeled on Cartesian epistemology – hierarchic confrontations like center – periphery, high – low, rational – irrational, relevant – irrelevant, developed – primitive? Should we not adopt a concept of culture based upon better understanding of diversity, marginalization and hierarchy in order to maintain the established balance of power and economic and cultural dependence? Do we really understand how the earthly powers have entered into our sociocultural hierarchies and thereby corrupted the legitimacy and practical innocence of universal reason?

Do we really require a universal concept of reason? Should we not develop a self-critical approach to the understanding of heterogeneous cultures and reasons interwoven with different (historical) traditions and socio-cultural values? Do we not require a cross-cultural concept for the translation and recognition of

varying cultural ideas which nonetheless share equal interest in peace, cultural dignity and appropriate, sustainable economies?

Do we really want the once emancipatory agenda of the Enlightenment to finally turn into a mere mythology of innovation. Do we really want politics of cultural self-determination to be replaced by a socially uncontrolled acceleration of technology and market forces? Would such a development not merely serve to legitimize and herald those apologists of social change who strive for the reckless construction of a cybernetic mass-consumer society excluding and marginalizing those groups perceived as unintelligible, primitive denizens of outmoded and backward worlds?

What could be the new role of culture in the "New Europe" of political unification and homogeneity in the West and democratic and economic reconstruction and transformation in the East?

Let me first describe my view of what the new role of the humanities will and can not be – namely more of the same traditional mono-disciplinary scholarship, more of the same old-fashioned scholarship in history, literature and language legitimizing and paraphrasing national narratives and cultural ideologies, more of the same uncritical study of empirical sources and historical archives. What then should it be? I think that the humanities should remodel themselves and recognize their new role as follows:

(1) critical, deconstructivist studies of European cultures with historical as well as contemporary perspectives using the full range

of interdisciplinary research tools recently developed and applied in Anglo-American cultural studies and social, historical and cultural anthropology.

(2) a better knowledge of the variety in European culture - what is common and what is different. Especially the borderline between the both sides of the former iron curtain has not yet vanished. What do we know about this rich variety?

(3) comparative studies of European and non-European cultures to modify unjust claims of "Eurocentrism" and furthermore gain a richer and more detailed picture of cultural diversity within European cultures and regions.

(4) self-critical contemplation of the politically influential tension of "we" and "the others" within a European frame to define the problematic relationship between European cultures and the "other" cultures in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

In the globalized world economy emerging today which relies increasingly on market forces, technology, media and telecommunications and excludes cultural issues from the political agenda, these may become very central issues. Especially so if questions of cultural identity, difference, and heterogeneity remain underestimated and marginalized. Critical human sciences researching the diversity of cultures could therefore play an important role in the public sphere of a "New Europe" now headed for the integration of the East and intensified routes of trade and

communication with the other parts of the world. The common Europe must be a laboratory of the future.

Within Europe and its societies the humanities could gain some ground by assuming subjects relevant for the public discourse. These include migration and minorities, transition to democratic life, the generation gap, the cleft between mainstream and marginal cultures, media and telecommunication issues and the extensive transformation processes in working- and consumer life triggered by advanced technology.

All of these ideas are relevant for a new Europe. A new Europe and new ideas are wanted not only in the field of scientific, technological, economic and political cooperation but also in the field of humanities. More than ever since 1945 Europe is faced with the challenge of moving toward the future as an active entity. Europe is experiencing a renaissance, maybe unforeseen and maybe against its own will. In discussing the "finalité d' Europe" we are discussing the future of the continent and the present transitorial situation. We can also meet the challenge posed by America and Asia only by realizing that there is more to the answer than the technical or economical dimension. We must also consider the further dimension represented by the humanities and all they have to offer. It is up to us to fuse technical skill with spiritual and intellectual capacity. For the sake of a better quality of life I wish that we may succeed. Teilhard de Chardin, the renowned natural scientist, philosopher and theologian, saw the history of mankind as a lengthy process, since he was convinced that we have not yet reached perfection as human beings. The history of man is aimed toward the improvement of the "conditio humana". At the end of

time, he believed, mankind will have reached perfection. Contrary to the theories of Francis Fukuyama, we have not yet reached the end of history.

I think it is time to prepare for a new step toward the perfection of mankind.

Let us start with culture in a common Europe.

Europe is not just a product of European rationality, and we cannot create this new Europe solely with research and statistical investigations, with complicated treaty mechanisms, or with conferences. We need the great stories. The world has been shaped by stories – and Europe ultimately is a result of these stories: not only the myths and fables of Greco-Roman literature or the stories and testimony in the Bible but also the epics and sagas of national literatures. These stories – taken as a whole, complementing each other, and intermingling – provide us with a paradigm of human existence. The tremendous variety of metaphors and their transformations illustrate a tremendous capacity for integration that led to occidental and western, to European culture.

We have lost our sense of orientation in many things today, our faith in life and the optimism of youth. But think about the creative power of Faust or Don Juan, the character of Don Quixote, or Jeanne d'Arc, or the fate of "war and peace". I could mention a story for every nation but will refrain from doing so. Moreover, I want to make it perfectly clear that there cannot be one standardized set of stories. Diversity provides the basis for the evolution of a common story. This is the only manner of common

history – and I consciously have avoided using the term "unified history" here – the only manner a common history can come into being. Mutual borrowing from each others' different stories is part of the creation of a common history, and no one in Europe can say that they have the one, true story. Hitler and Stalin said that, and claims of this sort always have been directed against Europe and against its culture. We have accumulated enough experience in this century with those story-tellers, who had the one, true story to tell.

Let us enlarge Europe, not on the map and not in terms of states, not in the number of institutions and their jurisdiction, but rather in our minds and in our hearts. After all, the myth of Europe is a love story that is part of our tradition.