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SPEECH

on the occasion of the Dagmar and
Václav Havel Foundation VIZE 97
Prize

Prague Crossroads

5 October 2008

« Does European Culture Exist ? »

I imagine that good Europeans such as yourselves, skeptical and armed with the necessary humor to weather crises as well as promises, do not expect me to provide an answer to the somewhat provocative question raised in the title of my talk: “Does European Culture exist?” Opening with such a question will allow me to approach the vast continent of “European culture” without needing to be systematically comprehensive. I will content myself with necessarily subjective “vignettes” highlighting themes which I’ve also chosen based on my own uncertainties regarding identity which, like those of Europe, seem to me to be both a handicap and a strength.

Cradle of the *identity quest*, European culture has continued to unfold both the *futility* of this quest and the interminable possibility of going beyond it. Herein lies the paradox: *there does exist an identity, mine, yours, but it is infinitely in construction, de-constructible, open and evolving*. It is a paradox that confers its unsettling fragility and its vigorous subtlety on the European project as a whole and on European cultural destiny in particular.

This is as far as I will venture in defining the European Community: it is an indefinitely reconstructible and open-ended identity quest that acts as a counterpoint to the *modern cult of identity*. And it is precisely this counterpoint, this “counter-current” which determines the value and the difficulty of European culture, but also, and consequently, that of the European project itself. I insist on qualifying this identity as “indefinitely surmountable” for at least two reasons.

First of all, I’ve experienced it firsthand as a European these past forty years. When I left Bulgaria to finish my thesis at the University of Paris, I could not have imagined, any more than anyone else at that time that Bulgaria would join the European Union. Coming from my obscure and still largely overlooked Balkan home, my encounter with European culture convinced me my identity was futile in the sense that it is open to the infinity of others – and it is this conviction that I want to share with you, for my work in France and around the world since has served to confirm and reinforce it.

Put differently, the various confluents that make up European civilization (Greco-Roman, Jewish, and for the past two thousand years, Christian, followed by their rebellious child, humanism, not forgetting the growing Muslim-Arab presence) as well as the national specificities have not reduced European culture to a handsome Harlequin coat, or more frighteningly, to a hideous grinder of victimized strangers. No, this diversity has coherently crystallized in such a way that, for the first time ever, asserts an identity while opening it to its own critical examination and the infinity of other identities. As we’ve entered the third millennium, it is possible to take responsibility for our European patrimony by rethinking it as an antidote to the tension surrounding identity: ours and everyone’s. This is the second reason which brings me back to this “counter current” specificity of identity that Europe is introducing to the world.

I will situate this philosophy of diverse and self-questioning identity in the concrete fields of language, nation and freedom.

I. Diversity and its languages

In October 2005, in response to a suggestion made first by France, then by Europe and strongly backed by Canada, Unesco adopted a convention on diversity that marked a major step in the emergence of an international cultural law. It is entitled “Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.” While proposing to “stimulate multiculturalism in order to develop cultural interaction with the idea of building bridges between peoples,” the convention also asserts “the sovereign rights of States to conserve, adopt and put into effect policies and measures” to this end. More than thirty countries have signed this convention that is still waiting to be put into effect.

From now on Europe is a political identity that speaks as many languages, if not more, than the countries it encompasses. To my mind, this multilingualism is the basis of cultural diversity

which must first and foremost be protected and respected – to protect and respect national specificities -, yet there must also be exchanges and cultural cross-breeding. This *novel* prospect for European men and women merits reflection and further probing.

European linguistic diversity is in the process of creating kaleidoscopic individuals capable of defying not only the bilingualism of *global English* imposed by globalization, but also the good old *francophonie* seeped in Versailles-gilt dreams, to become a carrying wave of tradition and innovation in this crossbreeding of languages and cultures. Little by little a new species has been emerging: a polyphonic subject, a polyglot citizen of a multinational Europe. Will the future European be a singular subject with an intrinsically plural psyche because she is trilingual, quadrilingual, multilingual? Or will she be reduced to global-speak?

The foreigner is different because she speaks another language. More and more young Europeans are going from one country to another, speaking the language of their country with that or those of others. In Europe we cannot escape the condition of being *foreigners*, this foreignness is tacked on to our original identity, becoming the more or less permanent lining of our existence.

It is by learning other languages that one can awaken a new passion for a given national language, which will be experienced not as a marvel nor as a nostalgic return to folklore, nor even as a vestige of the academe, but as a major indication of a resurgent diversity.

This detour by way of another language as a means of questioning and expanding oneself, which the European space strongly invites us to take, does not only concern national languages. Are we sufficiently aware that the supposedly universal values of *nation* and freedom are European born? More importantly, are we sufficiently aware what our political history and our taste for caustic elucidation allow us to identify as the advantages as well as the deadlocks and tragedies of these values? Are we capable of listening to the voice and decoding the gaze of those who Europe wounded? And to be the precursor in offering perspectives for creating a world of diversity and plurality made up of incommensurable singularities?

II. From the Nation, National Depression and its Surprises

Nation and *freedom* are both creations of European political culture: their ambiguity in the functioning of the European Union is at once a handicap and a boon; the history of the French *nation* and its current affairs as well as our practice of individual and collective *freedom* provoke crazes and polemical debates; and it is precisely in this context that *nation* and *freedom* nevertheless undergo an analysis, perhaps even an unprecedented reconstruction in the European space. Are we capable of making and sustaining these changes so that they are recognized outside of our European borders?

Let us remember above all that the concept of national unity which France first introduced to Europe, and subsequently, to the world, is an historical construct cloaked in myth. Though in France, as elsewhere, each person belongs to a family, to his group of friends, to his profession and province etc., French national cohesion is perhaps more tight knit than elsewhere, anchored in language, heir of the monarchy and republican institutions, rooted in the art of living and the harmonization of shared customs commonly called “French taste.” In France, the meta-familial envelop is neither the Queen nor the Dollar but the Nation. Montesquieu said it once and for all in *The Spirit of Laws* : « There are two sorts of tyranny: one real, which arises from oppression; the other is seated in opinion, and is sure to be felt whenever those who govern establish things shocking to the existing ideas of a nation. » In other words, the Nation stands as a counter power to executive tyranny and as a tyranny of opinion. This “way of thinking about the nation” is a political given everywhere, but it is a source of pride and an absolute in France. The Republic tempers it and sometimes exalts it. We’ve had numerous incidences in recent history where our perception of nationhood degenerated into narrow minded and xenophobic nationalism. The Nazi

horror rightly led us to condemn the Nation. And yet we notice that it is an error to forget it and that Europe is not alone in being responsible for this underestimation of the “nation phenomenon.”

Yet national pride has not fallen asleep: aggravated by unemployment and outsourcing, it could rapidly turn into a kind of Poujadist arrogance that thinly veils a laziness, a lack of motivation to move forward. For the French “people” of Robespierre, Saint-Just and Michelet, poverty is not a flaw: « The ever unhappy people », said Sieyès ; « The Unhappy applaud me », Robespierre congratulated himself ; « The unfortunate are the salt of the earth, » concluded Saint-Just. This glorification of the poor vindicates the cause of minimum wage earners when they lift their voices in protest. More than in any other country, in France the working class harbors a sentiment of superiority, that of belonging to a prestigious civilization they wouldn't trade for any of the perks of globalization.

Yet despite its continuity, national character can go through a depression just as individuals do. France has lost its image as the power it once was under de Gaulle. The voice of France is heard less and less; it has difficulties imposing itself in European negotiations and even less when competing with the United States. The migratory influx has created problems we are well aware of, and a more or less justified sentiment of insecurity, even persecution, has set in. Patriotic arrogance masks a severe loss in self-esteem and can even lead to depreciating oneself and others.

When faced with a depressed patient, the analyst begins by reestablishing his self-confidence: by restoring the patient's self image and establishing the relationship between the two protagonists of the cure for whom the words spoken become fecund (once again) a true analysis of the suffering can take place. Similarly, the depressed nation needs an optimal image of itself before being able to undertake, for example, European integration or industrial or commercial expansion or a better reception of immigrants. It is not a matter of flattering the French or lulling them with the illusion of possessing qualities they do not. But it is important to recognize the cultural heritage of the nation; France's aesthetic as much as its technical and scientific capabilities are not valued enough, particularly by intellectuals who are always prompt to doubt and push their Cartesian propensities to the point of self-hatred. A misunderstood universalism and colonial guilt have led numerous political and ideological actors to commit seemingly cosmopolitan acts of “imperceptible impoliteness,” as Giraudoux would say, in regard to the Nation, which have only served to aggravate national depression.

European nations are awaiting Europe and Europe needs national cultures with a healthy pride and sense of worth in order to achieve the cultural diversity mandated by Unesco. Such cultural diversity is alone the antidote to the evil of banality, this new version of the banality of evil. Our awareness of this specificity could play an important role in the attempt to find a new, global balance. This leads me to European specificity and its relation to what we call, a bit too dismissively, “American culture.”

III. Two models of civilization

The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 sharpened the difference between two models of culture: European and North American. To avoid any misunderstanding, I'd like to make it clear right off that we have here two different conceptions of freedom that democracies everywhere and without *exception* have had the privilege of using as models and elaborating. Different but complementary, these two version of freedom are, to my mind, equally present in international principles and institutions, both in Europe and across the Atlantic.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1789) Kant first defined what other humans had probably experienced yet not formulated : to wit - that freedom is not negatively speaking an “absence of constraint,” but that it is positively the possibility of « *self-beginning* », *Selbstanfang*. Associating « freedom » with self-beginning, Kant opened the way to a defense of enterprising subjectivity or self-initiative – if I allow myself to interpret his rather

“cosmological” thinking. Simultaneously, philosophy doesn’t fail to subordinate the freedom of Reason, be it pure or practical, to a Cause: divine or moral.

I will extrapolate by saying that in a universe increasingly dominated by technology and techniques, freedom has progressively become the aptitude to adapt oneself to a “cause” exterior to oneself which would be less a moral than an economic cause: in the best of cases, it would be both at once. In this order of thought favored by Protestantism – I’m alluding to the work of Max Weber on the connection between capitalism and Protestantism – freedom is perceived as a freedom to adapt to what Hannah Arendt called “the calculation of consequences,” to the logic of cause and effect, the logic of production, science, and economy. To be free would mean free to reap profits from the chain of cause and effect and to play the market of production and profit.

Globalization and free enterprise would be the natural outcome of this kind of freedom by which you are free...to secure the best place for yourself in the chain of productive cause-and-effects. The Supreme Cause (God) and the Technical Cause (financial power: euro or dollar) being the two interdependent and co-present variants which govern our freedom within this logic, one that can be seen as using people as cogs in the economy’s wheel. American civilization is better suited to this *freedom of adaptation*. The European culture which engendered it, notably from the seeds of the Protestant ethic, is less effective in this arena and resists being reduced to it – to the delight of some and the dismay of others.

Yet another model of freedom, also European-made, exists. It first made its appearance on the Greek stage with the pre-Socratic philosophers and developed by way of Socratic dialog. Without being subordinated to a cause, this other freedom precedes the concatenation of Aristotelian “categories” which are already in themselves the beginnings of scientific reason and technique: this fundamental freedom unfolds in the Speaking Being who delivers himself, gives himself, presents himself to himself and to others, and in doing so, liberates himself. This liberation of the Speaking Being by and in the *encounter with One and Another* was brought to light in Heidegger’s discussion on the philosophy of Kant (seminar of 1930, published under the title *The Essence of Human Freedom*¹.) It is a matter of inscribing this freedom of the surprising encounter as a kind of infinite questioning in the essence of philosophy before the freedom becomes fixed – but only subsequently – in the chain of cause and effect and in its mastery.

In view of the state of the modern world, it is necessary to insist on this second concept of freedom – which expresses itself in the Speaking Being through the Presence of Oneself to Another. It is the *poet* who is its privileged keeper, but she is not alone. There is also the *libertine*, defying the conventions of social cause-and-effect to express outwardly his dissident desire. The *transference* and *counter transference* of psychoanalysis also figure in here, as does the “revolutionary” if we consider his aim to *revolt*, a word whose meaning I’ve tried to highlight: from the Sanskrit *-vél*, return to the front, unveiling, a going back to the source, re-foundation, revelation. Understood as such, revolt is of interest to men and women today, particularly in Europe, which is on the point of uniting economic and political forces. This revolt inscribes the privileges of the individual above any other convention.

The European society which the European Union is trying to construct aspires to take into account the logic of globalization without adopting what we often refer to as the American model of an immoderate free market. This particularity arises from the conviction that we have two conceptions of freedom: that which adapts to the changes of technology and the globalized market and that which favors the *indefinitely reconstructible and open quest for identity* and singularity (which I evoked early on) contrary to economic, scientific, and identity-based imperatives and certitudes.

One can easily detect the risks of this second model based on a propensity to question: ignoring economic reality, getting caught up in blind corporatist battles, abandoning global competition,

¹ 1882, trad. fr. Gallimard, 1987.

giving in to laziness and archaism. But we also readily see the advantages of this model of freedom of which European cultures are the bearers. This other model – which is more an aspiration than a fixed project – is governed by a concern for human life in its most fragile singularity.

This *singularity* of each man and woman, the immeasurable, irreducible (and hence “genius”) qualities he or she brings to the community; this singularity and the respect it engenders are among the most surprising acquisitions of European culture and which constitute the foundation as well as the intimate face of the rights of man. It is precisely this concern for the singular subject that allows us to hear and adapt political rights to the poor, to the handicapped, to the elderly, but also to respect the specificities of sexual and racial difference. Only this concern for the singular can keep us from seeing humanity as a mass of diversities poised to consume the products of the free market (who would forgo a good shopping spree?).

Will we be able to preserve this concept of singular freedom for all humanity? Nothing is less certain, for it seems that we are all caught up in the maelstrom of calculation and consumerism and, as its sole counterpoint, we are experiencing the rebirth of sects wherein the sacred is not the permanent questioning I’ve evoked but a subordination to the very logic of cause and effect pushed to the absolute, the enslaving power of the sect’s fundamentalist belief system.

In this context, Europe is once again homogeneous and united. The war in Irak and the menace of terrorism have led some to notice a gap between the countries of “Old Europe” and those of “New Europe” as they put it. Without going too far into the complexity of this problematic, I would like to express two opinions, once again very personal, on this subject. First of all, it is imperative that “Old Europe” and France in particular take the economic difficulties of the “New Europe” very seriously, for their consequences render these countries particularly dependent on the United States. But it is also necessary to recognize cultural, and more particularly, religious differences which separate us from these countries, and to learn to respect these differences better (I’m thinking of Orthodox and Muslim Europe, of the persistent uneasiness in the Balkans). The famous “French arrogance” does not really prepare us for this task, and the Orthodox peoples of Eastern Europe feel bitter about being so poorly understood. On the other hand, Europe’s knowledge of the Arab world, after its many years of colonialism, makes us particularly attentive to Islamic culture and capable of moderating, if not avoiding all together, the “clash of civilizations” to which I’ve alluded. Yet at the same time the pernicious anti-Semitism of European countries should make us more vigilant about the rise of new forms of this ill.

On the surface, no one challenges the fact that the diversity of cultural models is the sole gage of respect for this “humanity” for which we have no other definition than *hospitality* which is all too easily betrayed by technological and robotic standardizing. We must be careful: this hospitality must not be a simple juxtaposition of differences with one model dominating over all the others: on the contrary, a hospitality of diversity requires that other logics, other freedoms be considered to expand each way of being. The humanity I’m seeking out – with Europe – can perhaps be defined as a process of complexification. Would this be another way of saying “European culture?”

In this vein, European cultural identity as I have tried to define it can well be taking a decisive step. We know the adage of French moralists: If God didn’t exist, we would have had to invent him. I would say that if Europe didn’t exist, we would have to invent it. It is in the interest of our multi-faceted freedom. It is also in the interest of the United States which is posing as a “Third Rome” of the globalized world, while at the same time growing increasingly aware of its people’s rejection of this cultural homogenization and its disastrous consequences.

I’m fully aware of the catastrophes that may await us this in this third millennium. The calculated devastation of minds? The automation of the species? Ecological apocalypse? My bet for Europe is not a façade of optimism without a cause: I want Europe to be fortified against the

dangers that assail us from all sides. But I want it to draw level with the potentialities of our culture, the risks and promises of which we are able to appreciate today.