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The European Identity

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NEMZETKÖZI KONFERENCIA

THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION - A VISION FOR EUROPE

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Gérard-François Dumont, a Sorbonne Egyetem volt rektora

THE EUROPEAN IDENTITY

People nowadays often think that Europe is a new reality, resulting from the will of a few men who launched the political construction of Europe in the 1950s. Actually Europe, as a consistent space, is much older. Europe has very ancient roots (Gérard-François Dumont, 1999), and a number of its habits and customs (but as well the road-system, for example), date from a time when the existing nations were not yet founded.





It seems therefore useful to study the myths and sources of Europe through historic events as they tend to be forgotten due to the priority that is given to economic information. First we have to consider geography, then history. And then, we have to study the features of such an identity.

The word “Europe” has at first glance a mythological meaning, being the name of the daughter of Agenor, the king of Phoenicia (the current Lebanon), who was carried off by Zeus and brought across the Mediterranean Sea to be married... So, as you see, the name is related to mythology and to geography. Which leads us to the first point.

I. Geographical roots?

In a French dictionary, the role of Europe is said to be “the worst delimited of the five continents”. Is Europe the territory from Brest to Brest-Litovsk, in the West of Belarus (then Poland), or, quoting General de Gaulle, “from the Atlantic Ocean to the Urals”? Russia has been asked for several centuries to draw up the symbolic limits of the European continent. Traditionally the Ural Mountains and the Ural River, which flows into the Caspian Sea, have been considered as its eastern limits. That choice is not based on geography but on history.

From the 18th century history has made Russia part of Europe, at the time when the Emperor, Peter The Great, decided that Saint Petersburg should be his capital. This town was founded on 14th May, 1703 (Wladimir Berelowitch and Olga Medvedkova, 1996), built by architects and technicians coming from all over Europe, and has been the symbol of the European Russia ever since (Michel Foucher, 1993).

But before and since thereafter, the geographic area of Europe as a “cultural area” has not been fixed completely. The Roman Empire, e.g., stretched from Scotland to Sicily and from Galicia (Spain) to the current Romania, defining the European geographical area without Germany or Slavic Countries – not to speak about Roman Africa and Roman Middle East. Of course, in that area, each province was different and had its own specificities. However, at the end of the Roman Empire, the Roman area was faced with an increasingly high split/division in politics between the Latin West and the Greek East. Later, in the Middle Ages, with the eastern schism of Catholic and Orthodox religion, in 1054, those two parts were also separated regarding religion, with on one side, the Roman papacy and on the other side, the Greek orthodox world.

In the 20th century and especially after World War II, the Eastern boundary of Europe was close to be defined along the Russian border and the “Iron Curtain”. After the 1917th Revolution, Lenin indeed tried to separate the western techniques of industrial production from its cultural matrix, aiming to make the cultural past over and entering a completely “new period of human destiny”. History has since told us how the attempt failed and the ideas that then appeared had basically been invalidated. All that leads us to the conclusion that a clear and definitive geographic boundary cannot be given to the European identity.

Therefore the European identity rather seems to be based on mentality – or culture/civilization – combining a set of values, which are both religious and philosophical, integrated with a particular practice of politics.



II. Europe's roots

We can identify basically five major roots, which are supposed to give us the system of "European Mentality": historical roots, political roots, religious roots, artistic roots and intellectual roots.

HISTORICAL ROOTS


From the era of Greek philosophers to today, the whole European history has been made by individual efforts that became Europe's acquired common heritage and knowledge. Without going into details, it is easily observable, that Europe – despite all the quarrels, wars and different power games going on – has shared a special and common history, which brought not only western civilization but also mankind roughly to the point where it is now, and this in the major fields of science, technology, politics (democracy) and art. Europe shares therefore a common experience/history, which is not always clearly visible in the details (because of national/linguistic/cultural differences) but does exist without any doubt.

POLITICAL ROOTS

As far as politics is concerned, Europe has kept through the centuries the mark of the Roman Empire, which governed a huge area with an efficient organization, which was able to dominate over numerous peoples and territories. From Syria to Gaul (today France), you can see the same temples, the same porches, the same amphitheatres, and the same aqueducts. The Roman influence can still be seen in every European country today, not only in architecture and urbanism (town planning), but also in Law, in customs and in institutions. The influence of the Romans has remained within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. On the other side of the border-line, only barbarian people used to live – this, at least, was the Roman idea about non-Roman peoples.

The demographic fall and the incapacity of integrating the great number of barbarian people migrating into the Empire was the main cause of the collapse of the Roman Empire and its partition in the year 395. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the dream of a unified Europe as an Empire was sought many times, without success. The first and one of the best attempts of constructing Europe was due to Charlemagne, crowned as emperor by the Pope Leon III on Christmas day in the year 800. The "Holy Roman Empire" was born.

Helped by the monks of Saint-Benedict, the Carolingian Empire managed to govern with relative peace the different peoples belonging to the Empire. However, the attempt of Charlemagne to unify those peoples was impossible given there was not a European political consciousness yet, given that material reality (Middle Ages!) was not required for unification but needed divided, local powers. And after the death of Louis Le Pieux in 840, his sons governed the Western Empire and created enormous antagonisms within Europe because, in 843, the treaty of Verdun divided Europe along the language borderline between the French and the Germans. From that period on, the different peoples started to create their own nations, fighting de facto against the idea of a European unity and political supremacy. The European "civil wars" that



broke out in the following centuries, including those in the 20th century, partly resulted from that new partition of Europe along the Rhine.

A second attempt was made in the 10th century by the Emperor Otho I, crowned in 962, who tried to draw together the European territories and peoples, as did others after him, wanting to impose a single political authority in Europe. The princes of Saxony, Hohenstaufen and Habsburg wanted to achieve imperial prerogatives. But the French Crown managed successfully to fight against the claim to the “universal European power” and the constitution of a European empire by Spanish and Austrian Habsburg failed.

In the 18th century France became hegemonic. Napoleon I, based on the ideology of the French Revolution and the force of the idea of nation, wanted to be a European and organize all of Europe on the French centralized pattern – he failed in his attempt. In the 20th century, the Germans in World War I., and then, a second time, with Hitler - in spite of his anti-humanistic and pagan ideology - tried to appear as the heir to the Holy Roman Empire using its symbols. (Arnold Toynbee, 1996).

After World War II, the construction of Europe has resulted from the will of political power (French-German reconciliation with De Gaulle and Adenauer – Hermann Kusterer, 2000) and peoples, with the tendency to some administrative and bureaucratic imperialism, which is politically useful for unification but neglects to respect one of the principle political values of Europe: the essential principle of subsidiarity.

Thus, the search for a European political unification has been a long story, facing many failures. That is why religion and mentality, art and university seem to have been much more essential if not for the actual political construction of Europe, then for European political consciousness to emerge.

RELIGIOUS ROOTS

The spreading of the Christian message in Europe very early, in the first centuries for the Roman controlled space, at the beginning of the Middle Ages for the German and Slavic populated Europe, has created very strong ties overriding the language diversities. The first reason for such strong ties is the fact that the organization of Christianity has been based on the model of the Roman Empire. Then, the Catholic Church, while claiming the universal aspect of Catholicism, has also taken local particularities into account.

The fast expanding exchanges among monasteries as well as pilgrimages, such as that of Compostelle, have given religion a European dimension. But especially, people were spiritually unified in Christianity, on a mental basis forged by the Christian system of values and morals.

ARTISTIC ROOTS

The same model of universality respecting local particularities combined with universal pan-European values can be seen in the artistic domain. Religion was, at the beginning, the main factor for art development. In spite of great regional diversity, Roman art and then Gothic art have spread all over Europe. A few centuries later the Renaissance and Baroque artistic styles contributed in some trans-European cultural harmony you can call “European”.



The emerging of modern, industrialized and scientific Europe did not brake the common base-ments of artistic expression even though art had become independent of the Church, develop-ing into the incredible diversity of all sectors, from literature to music, from painting to archi-tecture.

INTELLECTUAL ROOTS

In the Middle Age, Europe was again a single cultural space if taken for what counts most in intellectual life: the elite. The same language of communication (Latin) was used commonly and complementary universities and urban networks emerged. Latin even remained the common lan-guage of the elite until almost the mid-17th century (with other lingua franca, as Italian in the Renaissance, French from 1600 to 1920, English today). The discovery of printing in about 1440 not only led to the spread of Latin-written books but also to translations, allowing the forma-tion of a “unified” cultural space, and this despite the development of national languages.

The oldest universities – Bologna in Italy, Salamanca in Spain, Coimbra in Portugal, Oxford in England and La Sorbonne in France – were built in a transnational aim.

New institutions were born at the end of the 12th and 13th centuries, composed of cor-porations of teachers and students having statutes and programs, books and exams (Jean Car-pentier and François Lebrun, 1990).



Using Latin as the language of exchange, universities spread over Europe teaching with both classic and Christian common bases. There, Roman Law was reintroduced and philosophy study was based on the teaching of church and philosophical thinking of Ancient Greeks.

A European intellectual elite then came out, unified with the same thirst for knowledge and who started to reach a scientific autonomy beyond the dogmas of the Church – especially after Luther's Reformation (1518). One could then speak about a "civilization of Europe during the Renaissance" (John Hale, 1998). And this unwanted but nevertheless proceeding intellectual unification process went on with the Enlightenment, French Revolution, Industrialization and scientific development.

CONCLUSION OF EUROPE'S ROOTS

The existence of all these territorial, political and religious roots gives evidence that Europe existed before the present nations. It is like the word "Europe", which was first used in a text written by Hesiod, a Greek poet who was born in Beotia in the middle of the eighth century before Christ... nearly 3000 years ago, certainly long before present-day Europe existed.

III. The ideal values

The heritage of Europe through its history on the "ideal ground" can be summed up by four values.

First: equality, respect for others, related to mercy and charity, resulting from a particular conception of the human being.

Freedom then, which is another foundation of Europe, which gives to the individual person the possibility of express herself freely.

Third: creativity and capacity to be inventive as a result of a human being free.

And fourth: the separation between temporal and spiritual powers.

These four values express themselves today in a national frame, which could be called "the genius of nations".

EQUALITY, RESPECT AND TOLERANCE

The interest given to others is difficult to date accurately. What we know is, that even very old civilizations practiced charity. Important for Europe however is the fact, that the Greek democratic ideal was based on the belief in the active participation of everyone in the life of the city for the community to be well managed. Even if in practice, this democracy was aimed at only a part of the population, excluding slaves and foreigners (and women). For example, Plato did not take them into account when creating his demographic optimum population density theory.

And, for the first time ever, the individual was thought as a citizen actively taking part in the political process, and not only as a "subject" of one or the other king.

Another step towards acknowledging human being was made when Rome invented a kind of economic minimum life. The formula *panem et circenses* amounts to the current French R.M.I.



(minimum income for insertion). Especially very elaborated social laws appeared or included new essential elements (Gérard-François Dumont, 2000). The breakdown of the Roman Empire and the new barbarian (that is to say: German) social rules changed this somehow but the spread of Christianity and therefore "Christian charity" reintroduced some "social care for others".

Though not being a democracy, the Empire implemented a kind of a public charity. Christianity, associating economic and social activities, improved the awareness of the importance of helping the others. Charity, even linked with power, started to play an essential part in society. Indeed people considered then that everyone had a right for protection. The numerous debates and discussions that occurred everywhere gave evidence that the Europeans adhered to that ideal. For example, in Great Britain, at the end of the 18th century, a huge debate ensued between the supporters of the Poor Law and those supporting Malthus whose "moral restraint" forced the poor not to marry and therefore not to give birth to children, aiming at tackling the number of births (he wrongly considered to be too high) (Gérard-François Dumont, 1982).

Actually the European identity has not taken shape in social measures, which are not the same in every country, but in the basic idea that human beings are equal because they all belong to mankind. To deny what is human in someone else is to deny one's own rights that are defined, after the French Revolution, in the Universal Declaration of Rights.

The Universal Declaration of Rights of man has been the result of a long process of the thought, which started with pagan philosophers like Cicero and materialized only thoroughly with Jesus, who declared the equality of every man. Then, of course, the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" constituted a great source of inspiration, still having a constitutional value in France today.

However, equality before a superior principle and before everyone else demands another central value, that of freedom.

FREEDOM


Freedom as it has been defined in Europe is the outcome of a long process. The Greeks, themselves, struggled for their freedom against the tyranny of the Persian Emperors, and succeeded.

The Romans, despite some casual importance given to freedom during the three main periods (Royal, Republican and Imperial) left intact both the concept and practice of the *curtus honorum* they created, which means, that every political dignitary is responsible for his acts done in his function.

Though being based on social background and wealth during the Republican and Imperial eras and therefore concerning only a part of the population, the system of the promotion of the elite enabled citizens to take part in the common task.

Then, at the beginning of the new millennium, in the midst of Middle Ages, slavery was universally condemned by Christianity, as it had been by the pagan literature with Seneca and then by the Stoic philosophers.

The "Third Renaissance" as it has been called (Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, 1990), after the Carolingian Renaissance and the "Middle Age Revolution" in the 12th century, was then born in Italy in the Quattrocento period. Renaissance meant the spreading of humanism all over Europe, as a result of the influence of monasteries and universities and rising bourgeoisie.



Even the so-called European barbarians, in particular the Germans, provided free men with much more autonomy than the Persian subjects, for example. During the Middle Age that kind of Germanic system of freedom spread in Europe, particularly in the Helvetica Confederation, which was the first European democratic entity, 500 years before the American and French Revolutions (Anselm Zurfluh, 1993).

Beside the strong influence of the Roman and German concepts of freedom, another step towards access to freedom was made thanks to communal autonomy (Max Weber, 1921). Medieval towns, thanks to their wealth and economic power, were given independence from feudal power rather early, acquiring at the same time “unlimited freedom” in commerce and industry.

The autonomy of towns is a very European right. Towns early played a significant economic and political role because of the strong density of the population in European towns. The strong rural productivity lead people to take part in new urban activities.

The first assemblies of free men, as those in German countries, also allowed access to freedom. In this sense, in 1215 the English signed the Magna Carta, looking for a balance between the Royal power and individual freedom. Switzerland was born thanks to the will of assemblies of citizens of free men to have access to independence. For that reason the perpetual alliance was signed in 1291 by three central Swiss cantons (Uri, Schwyz and Unterwald), constituting the first step towards the Helvetica Confederation, in the center of Europe (Anselm Zurfluh, 1993). Regarding politics, the English revolutions brought about decisive progress. In 1679 the habeas corpus protected citizens against the arbitrary action of the state guaranteeing the legal rights of citizens. It provided the basis to a Parliamentary monarchy that was to become the first modern state in the world in 1689 (Bill of Rights).

The political dimension of freedom then became increasingly important. Of course, America in its struggle to get rid of European state-power gave birth to the first (European) Constitution, which guaranteed freedom to every person. In France, freedom was one of the central themes of Revolution. Voted on August 26th, 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of man and citizen can be seen as the result of the former evolutions of the concept of freedom. It played a major role in the whole of Europe and spread over the world the idea of freedom. As we saw it before it influenced much of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It guided the movements of national liberation in the 19th century. The Italian unification was also guided by the idea of freedom symbolized by the Nabucco by Verdi.

The will of women to have access to freedom has led to major evolutions in Europe in the 19th century. Women had more access to education and were thus able to apply for a job. They created associations and edited newspapers. Their statues changed in Great Britain, where they got rights on their property, which was not the case before. At the beginning of the 20th century some feminist movements were born claiming the right to be given the vote. Finland gave it to women in 1906, as did Norway in 1913. In Great Britain the suffragettes created the social and political union of women.

However, political theories hindered such a will. French socialists thought the emancipation of the working class was much more important and had to precede that of women. Others thought that it was not worth thinking about that question, often supporting the idea of the familial suffrage. As a result, the French government gave women the vote only in 1945.



In conclusion: In Europe there are three main levels of freedom related to individual freedom, which are complementary: the freedom of thought, which is an infeasible right for everybody, the freedom of acting, within the respect for the freedom of others, and finally that of freely electing a government with democratic principles.

Freedom as a value is central to personal initiative and creativity, which are the sources of scientific, technical and economic progress.

CREATIVITY AND OPEN-MIND

The European spirit is defined by the genius for invention stimulated by curiosity. That curiosity is indeed nothing new. It has existed in every man since the dawn of times but only from the Greek era on. This curiosity was systematically used for the benefit of mankind. This fact is symbolized by both the famous sentence of Socrates "I know that I do not know" and the "Aristotelian astonishment", which gave birth to human "scientific" interrogation. During the Roman era authorities often appealed to the techniques of the Greeks and the Etruscans. Knowledge, if it should have any social influence, networks such as roads, universities, monasteries etc. have all to play essential parts allowing the maximum of exchanges among individuals. Fast exchange of information and products, administrators and armies, is the reason for the construction of multiple strategic and commercial roads by the Romans. At the beginning of the 13th century, the possibility of crossing the Gothard pass in the European Alps (Gérard-François Dumont, 1998) provided Europe with an effective communication axis allowing commercial relations between Northern and Southern Europe, both economically growing fast but cut off by the Alpine barrier. An open mind and the constant search for new things were symbolized by the travels of the Franciscan Jean du Plan Carpin to Mongolia, Marco Polo, who reached Beijing (Peking) in 1275, Vasco de Gama and that of Christopher Columbus, which led to the discovery of the continent to which Amerigo Vespucci gave its name.

In the Renaissance, innovation was paradoxically based on the study of the past. The aim was not to live the Greek and Roman past again, but to explore it again and study the elements that can be helpful for the future. The new study of Greek and Latin texts, which were so rich, should give the possibility to think further on that "new-old" basis.

The spirit of creativity includes the capacity of assimilating in a clever way foreign skills and concepts. The Roman Art, for example, has come out of permanent inventions that did not hesitate to use techniques from Eastern Constantinople Europe or Middle East Islamic countries. In the Middle Age, Europe, through Sicily and Spain opened to the Arab techniques and sciences. The rise of the Middle Age was not only due to an increase of demographic density and in productivity throughout Europe, but also to these exchanges and the way Europe managed to use them.

The European spirit cannot be satisfied forever with a given solution, not even regarding art. The Roman art, though new at its period, turned into the Gothic Art as can be seen in the cathedral of Saint-Denis, built between 1140-1143.

The thirst for understanding, meaning the will to always have and know more while being relatively but increasingly free, has allowed an exceptional creativity, which is itself the source of lasting growth in every field.



THE SEPARATION OF POWERS

Eventually the last main practice that has been specific to Europe is the principle of the separation of powers. The Constitution of the United States, the daughter of Europe, was influenced essentially by Montesquieu and instituted the effective separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers. That formal distinction has been made of the Constitution of the United States, the founder country of modern democracy.

Such a principle is not only due to the fact that the individual freedom of the citizens has to be protected, but also to a much stronger principle that had been previously announced by Christianity. The formula, which was incompletely and lately translated, said that man had to accomplish his duties, whatever they may be, especially facing the political authority. But at the same time the principle implied a separation between temporal and spiritual powers. The implementation of such a separation of power has been a long story and faced many difficulties. In 380, the Edict of Thessalonique imposed the Roman (Catholic) faith, putting an end to a period when the Christians were sometimes persecuted, and sometimes tolerated. The risk of confusing Cesar and God then became important, Christianity being given the statute of a state religion. The most careful fathers of the Catholic Church kept aloof from any theocratic conception and increasingly affirmed the autonomy of the Church against political power. In particular, the Emperor was not allowed to nominate the bishops, to interfere with the administration of ecclesiastical patrimony or to control what was preached (Hubert Zenhacker and Jean-Claude Fredouille, 1993). But the separation of powers does not keep churches, particularly the Catholic Church, from having a say about topics, using its moral authority.



This "division of power" between spiritual and material power is now common law. In the United States, secularism is institutional, in France it is legal, but the consequences are the same. Indeed, no one could even think about making a European country a theocratic country, insofar as that would be too different from, even opposed to, the political practices of the continent.

THE GENIUS OF NATIONS

It would be nonsense to think that the four main realities and values of the European identity [equality (related to humanism), freedom, creativity (related to an open mind) and the separation of powers] can only be seen in Europe. Arnold Toynbee counted 33 civilizations where such values were important, including civilizations that do not exist anymore, such as the Aegean one; the ethnologist Hewes counted 76, 44 of which remained at a pre-Neolithic level. However, what makes the European system special, is the fact that we cannot find in any other civilization these values at such an intense and complementary inter-actional, back-feeding level.

The construction of the values of the European identity until the 16th century went through several cultural, religious and/or political European stages. The stage of the megaliths with dolmens that stretched from 4000 to 2000 before Christ had a European geographic area, but probably not a "European spirit" as we are trying to define it. But the following civilizations were European, beginning with that of the Celts, from the 6th to the 1st century before Christ, because they were based on a common "ideological factor" called the Indo-European "ideological basis". This basis is also true for the Greek civilization (which is supposed to initiate "European Culture", the Greco-Latin civilization, and the Roman Empire lasting from the 6th century B.C. to the 4th, then for the German, from the 5th to the 8th, and more and more accurate with the Western Christendom from the 10th to the 15th century, and the Renaissance in the 16th century. From the 15th century Europe, particularly its major nations (Portugal, Spain, France, England and Holland) went out into the world. The 16th and 17th centuries are those of the Reformation and absolutism. Then in the 18th century, the so-called century of "Lumières" (the Age of Enlightenment) and the philosophical development of the concept of freedom materialized "modern ages", followed with the modernization in Europe in the 19th century. The rise in technology and industry enabled the European countries to dominate almost the whole rest of the globe. But after the first half of the 20th century, which can be called a period of "European self-destruction", the colonization – as a major contradiction to the basic values which defines Europe - has been given up. Material interest and spiritual incompatibility with basic values are the reasons for the end of colonization. Colonization had become intolerable since it did not allow a good part of the world to live as free as European peoples did - how can one deny to others the freedom that you enjoy yourself?

From 1950 Europe has been divided and opened at the same time, both elements are constitutive for European identity. We know that Europe asserted itself more during the "non-imperial" periods, either at the European or the national level. Freedom indeed means, beyond a European common universal, that great cultural diversity can exist at different levels. The famous cities as Paris, Florence, Prague, Budapest or Vienna present their own cultural and spiritual features, though having a common patrimony. That is also the case for the different provinces of Europe, such as Britannia, Scotland, Andalusia or Bavaria, whose cultures are linked



with their geographic situation and their historical past. Eventually, between the European identity and local culture there is a stronger cultural reality, that of each nation, based on common languages, religions and solidarity, which seems to remain some essential cement.

CONCLUSION

Diversity and pluralism, based on the same philosophical substance, characterize Europe. They are the reason for its cultural influence that spread over all continents. Europe has remained an outstanding cultural mosaic. In his press conference on May 15th, 1962, General De Gaulle explained that paradox: "Dante, Goethe and Chateaubriand belong to Europe, insofar as they were respectively and eminently Italian, German and French. They would not have been useful for Europe, had they been stateless and had they thought and written in some integrated Esperanto or Volapük."

Therefore the outcome of the study of the European identity is clear: it shows that Europe has found its force in finding some balance between its common cultural bases and the diversity of its practices. In order to face the problems of the 21st century, Europe needs unity, of course, but not some Jacobin, over-centralized unity. The real identity of Europe is based on its "ideal values" and its capacity for learning from the diversities of its peoples by using the principle of subsidiarity of each of its peoples.

However, the construction of Europe now requires a new impulse and more passion. To find again the essential things, such as the civilizing spirit is important. Europe's brother, Cadmos, displayed such a civilizing spirit when teaching the alphabet to the Greeks. As mythology taught us, Europe has always been a love story (Zeus eloping with Europe!). Europe will live only if the European peoples keep promoting the human values that they inherited from their civilization.

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EURÓPAI FÜZETEK

KÜLÖNSZÁM



Európai Alkotmány – európai jövőkép

**Nemzetközi konferencia
Budapest, 2003. október 28.**

A Miniszterelnöki Hivatal Kormányzati
Stratégiai Elemző Központ és a
Külügyminisztérium közös kiadványa