

In Search of Lost Universalism

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Association of Schools of Political Studies of the Council of Europe let me begin by expressing my gratitude to our hosts, the Bosch Foundation and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Thanks to them, we are able to hold what promises to be a very interesting meeting.

Anyway, this meeting comes at the right time since it will deal with very topical issues. At present, the world is experiencing enormous upheavals which are upsetting and sometimes disorienting both nations and ordinary people. Europe itself seems to be losing its reference points and its values. But it isn't just Europe. In Asia, Africa and America change is so rapid and drastic that some, if not all people no longer know where they stand. They find it hard to make economic choices and come to terms with the many social problems facing them. They appear to have lost their identity, their culture, their civilisation, their values and their reference points.

In very general terms it seems that the more globalisation develops with ever increasing exchanges worldwide (growth of travel; instant internet communication almost everywhere, etc.), the more confused people become and the more their reference points (and I reiterate the word because that really is what is at stake), the more their reference points dissolve in a vaguely universal magma, which is anything but reassuring. Many are scared.

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As far as Europe is concerned, these trends are particularly obvious and troubling.

After all Europe defines itself through its culture. We could even say through its civilisation which is made up of different national, regional, ethnic or religious cultures. Our civilisation was not created in one day. It took some three thousand years to elaborate its basic tenets such as the concept of human rights. At the outset this notion was neither natural nor universal. It evolved slowly over the centuries, after the monotheistic religions of Palestine established the principle that God created man in his own image. From then on human beings, whether beautiful or ugly, good or evil, stupid or intelligent, became «sacred». After many stages of development (the Greek philosophers, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Habeas Corpus, Magna Carta, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, etc.) this concept became Europe's supreme value: human rights which were taken up, strengthened and protected through legal rules enshrined in the institutions created after

World War II : the Council of Europe through the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, etc.

After this long process which led to the recognition of human rights, we had the generosity... or presumption to turn human rights into a universal value. That is all well and good and the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a welcome development but, in truth, this notion has never been really universal.

On the one hand, it has come up against civilisations or sometimes religions which see their supreme values in terms other than human beings. For instance, there are those who see Nature as the supreme value ; or another example is communist ideology which ranks the collective interest above that of the individual, etc.

On the other hand, the notion of human rights is also constantly challenged by those who come to power either by force or through elections and cannot bear the thought of curtailing their power out of respect for those « little midges » for which they take human beings!

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In Europe today, this is a source of great concern for the wider Europe of the 47 member Council of Europe and for the European Union.

The situation is all the more serious because both these organisations have done more than just voice fine words of intent. As I said earlier they have developed legal instruments (ECHR, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) which impose legally binding obligations. They also have control mechanisms, the Strasbourg and Luxembourg Courts, which are independent jurisdictions.

However, although human rights have been given force of law they are far from fully respected, and the situation is getting worse. Humanist philosophy, on which the European project was based in keeping with the wishes of the Founding Fathers (Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi, Jean Monnet...) is being eroded.

Gradually, surreptitiously a different political philosophy is taking shape.

The spiritual principles underpinning the post-WW II European project which were intentionally the exact opposite of the 1930s ideology are being replaced by pervasive materialism which gradually takes hold of the economy, finance and then money. Obviously the economy is very important as demonstrated by our difficulty in overcoming the present crisis but human beings also need a code of conduct and spiritual, but not necessarily religious, values. They need moral and ethical guidelines. They need reference points.

The European project, as conceived by the Council of Europe and the European Union is, first and foremost, an open project. Its purpose is to learn to live together respecting each other and respecting cultural differences. Openness to others, tolerance and reconciliation! Openness! This is the opposite of current trends characterised by an inward looking mindset, introversion, egotism and absence of

solidarity. Just think for a moment about the tragic situation of the thousands of refugees from Syria and elsewhere who are asking us for asylum. Many Europeans and – I am sorry to say – many of my compatriots favour rejecting them, closing our borders, turning in on ourselves. Think of the recent elections in Poland... I pay tribute to Mrs. Merkel who, a few days ago, backed by Germany's grand coalition, put her foot down and saved Europe's honour. The right to asylum is a fundamental human right. To abandon it is a retrograde step. And where will we end up if we continue going backwards? Of course, there will be serious practical difficulties to accommodate these refugees. Angela Merkel is well aware of that. Germans will have to make great efforts. But as I listened to the Chancellor, yes I have to admit I breathed a sigh of relief ! And I very much hope her colleagues in other countries will now follow suit.

However there is a third dangerous threat developing today, namely the resurgence of nationalism; that kind of ultranationalism which turned the 20th century into a century of appalling conflict and devastation with the 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 World Wars. This was also the century which saw isolationism and hatred of others spawn totalitarian régimes Europe-wide with Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, Stalin in Russia, etc.

Today we have not reached that stage but the threat is present across the whole of Europe. Nationalistic and populist political parties, are growing in number and influence. I am sad and worried that France, my own country, the cradle of human rights, is no exception!

I will not mention any others but I could easily do so since to a greater or lesser extent they are all at risk.

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What should we do?

First of all we need to grasp what is going on and be conscious of the danger.

Should our organisations (Council of Europe, European Union) intervene? As moral authorities they certainly should voice their condemnation. But can they or should they impose sanctions? They do have a number of legal instruments. In the case of the Council of Europe, there is the European Court of Human Rights and the Organisation's Statute. In that of the EU, there is Article 7 of the European Union Treaty. However sanctions are difficult to impose and don't always produce the desired results. Sometimes they even have the opposite effect. Whether sanctions are actually taken or if one just settles for mere political condemnations these may unfortunately actually aggravate nationalism, introspection and hatred of others, neighbours, foreigners etc.

Nowadays some Heads of State have become past masters at striking patriotic chords giving pride of place to country, nation and the State to the detriment of human rights.

If sanctions and condemnations don't work then what's to be done ?

Unfortunately I can't be with you tomorrow to attend the planned panel discussions and round tables on the role of history, memory, civic education etc.

I am sorry I can't stay on as I would have loved to hear the different speakers. In my opinion, education is the best tool when it comes to knowing and defending basics such as the values underpinning societies. And by education I mean education for all, and not just an elite, to make us citizens: informed citizens with a knowledge of history and able to learn from it; citizens open to others and able to learn from what is good and reject what is bad; wise citizens able to reject seemingly attractive ideas which in the long run are highly dangerous.

Education, education, education! In France we often speak of Jean Jaurès, the great political leader, who was himself a teacher and always attached the utmost importance to education, which he saw as the only way to help develop clear-sighted and responsible citizens.

Today in our countries – at any rate in France – we have too often forgotten to teach young people the lessons of the past. We have sacrificed civic education. Or worse still, for instance in Central Europe, once freed from the yoke of Communism and Soviet domination, some countries introduced into their educational systems a cult of their national past which does nothing to help develop a spirit of open mindedness! On the contrary!

Arguing that education is of vital importance in these troubled times won't solve all our problems. But what is taught must contribute to developing openness rather than cultivating closed minds as can unfortunately also happen.

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In any event one thing is certain. More than ever the Council of Europe's Schools of Political Studies have their work cut out. They have a role to play with the support of all those (political parties, trade unions, voluntary organisations, foundations, etc.), which are fully committed to humanist values, to those values which are at the very heart of European civilisation and which – why not – could become universal... But for the time being the European project is in danger, and Europe's soul is under threat.