

Havel, Vaclav: Europe as task

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I RECENTLY tried to ascertain where Europe's name came from. I was somewhat surprised to find that its many see its primeval roots in the Akkadian world 'erebu' which means twilight or sunset. Asia, on the other hand, is believed to have derived its name from Akkadian 'asu', meaning daybreak.

At first sight this discovery does not appear very encouraging; the word twilight has been traditionally linked in our minds with the notions of end, extinction, defeat, ruin or approaching death. In certain respects, this conventional linkage is valid: twilight indeed brings with it the end of something, at least the end of one day and the hustle and bustle that filled it. But it does not mean defeat, doom or the end of time. Far from it: it is just a punctuation mark in the eternal cycle of nature and life in which something ends simply so that something else may begin. For a human being, this means, for instance, that **the time of labour that is external**, largely physical and directed toward the world around comes to an end, **to be replaced by a time of quiet contemplation, of reflection, evaluation, introspection, of endeavor that is directed inward**. From time immemorial it has been in the evening that people would reflect on what they have done during the preceding day and on the meaning these efforts may have had and pause to look at things in perspective, to regain their strength and to make resolutions for the following day. In somewhat simplified terms, one may say that while dawn and broad daylight are the time of hands, twilight is the time of the mind.

The rather gloomy associations we tend to attach to the word

twilight may be the fruit of a typically modern cult of beginnings and starts, progress and growth, inventions, rises and advancements, of a cult of industriousness, outward activity, expansion and energy, that is, of the typically modern blind faith in quantitative indices. Dawn, daybreak, sunrise, 'the morning of nations' and similar words, metaphors or phrases are popular these days, while sunset, quiet, pause or nightfall evoke in us unjustly only connotations of stagnation, decline, disintegration or nothingness.

We are unfair to twilight. We are unfair to the phenomenon that possibly gave our continent its name.

Time of contemplation and self reflection

IT IS TRUE that a certain phase in the history of Europe appears to be drawing to a close.

The extraordinary fortunate combination of the spirit of classical antiquity, Jewish religiosity, Christianity and the fresh energy of the former so-called barbarian tribes eventually led to the historically unprecedented **European advancement that has gradually brought humanity countless things of value**, influencing the entire planetary civilization of our time. Europe seems to have introduced the categories of time and historicity, to have discovered evolution and ultimately what we call progress as well. Maybe the whole of known European history will, when seen from a distance of centuries, appear as a single day full of vigorous activity, great human efforts, great discoveries of the human mind, great energies and the ethos of expansion linked thereto. From the secret of Being and salvation to the secret of matter, from the treasures hidden on faraway continents to political values such as the dignity and liberty of the human being, the rule of law and the equality of citizens before the law -all these are areas in which Europe has accomplished a remarkable work of discovery which Europe then spread further, often to the benefit of the world as a whole, yet often as well to the

world's detriment. The history of Europe has not only been a history of the furtherance of the concepts of salvation, freedom, progress and humanity, it has also been a history of harsh suppression of other cultures, of conquest, plundering, colonization and the export of highly dubious articles, from among which I would mention just one that is dangerous indeed and whose effects I personally experienced, that is, communist ideology. And if the world owes such good and useful things as democracy, the notion of human rights or television and computer to the European spirit of progress, rise and continuous quest, it also owes that same European spirit much of its gigantic social differences, the arrogant anthropocentric treatment of our planet, the cult of consumerism as well as the piles of highly destructive weapons that are often found in the hands of very dubious regimes. In this century, this ambiguous European expansion reached its sad climax in two World Wars into which our continent plunged the world.

The various gifts whose origins lie in the European concept of progress were long ago adopted by others as well. Many have embraced them so thoroughly that now surpass Europe -on the very ground where Europe once claimed its lasting dominance. For a long time now, Europe has not been the centre of several huge colonial empires or the control room of the world, and it no longer has a decisive say on the world's fate.

It seems to me that this is the time for us to pause and reflect upon ourselves. It seems to me that we are facing a great historic challenge, a challenge to finally grasp and begin to put into practice the best possible meaning of the word 'twilight'. **That is, we should cease to see the present state of Europe as the twilight of its energy and recognize it instead as a time of contemplation and self reflection,** as a time when physical rush stops for a while and when, as the sun goes down, the rule of thought sets in. This does not mean estrangement from ourselves and the world we live in. It simply

means taking a calm look back at what we have accomplished, assessing the meaning and the consequences of our endeavours and making a few good resolutions for the next day.

Throughout its modern history I think Europe has never had a better opportunity to do so than it has now, and it would be a blameworthy error to fail to grasp it.

With your permission, I shall try to outline a few subjects we should give more serious thought to if we are to spend this time of evening meditation in a truly meaningful way, so that it is not just an occasion for tired slumbering after work or nostalgic reminiscences about the physical achievements of long bygone times, but rather a time to articulate Europe as a task for the twenty-first century.

We have common destiny, common values and a common culture of life.

THE TERM Europe today has essentially three meanings: The first one is purely geographical, determined by the lines on the map on the wall of every elementary school and in every atlas.

The second meaning of Europe refers basically to the group of European countries that were spared the experience of communism, most of which are now members of the European Union. It thus embraces that part of Europe that has been relatively stable in political terms and prosperous economically and has, step by step, furthered its integration into one large political and economic league. This Europe is certainly and appealing to everyone else; it is no coincidence that in many of the countries that do not belong to this grouping we hear again and again the slogan about their 'return to Europe', which essentially means admission to the club of those historically more fortunate nations who were allowed to live on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Europe in this sense of the word is, however, -let this be admitted-

an entity that shows relatively little concern for the challenge I have just spoken about, that is, the challenge to rise above the everyday striving and undertake a profound self-examination about its role in our civilization. Stretching the point a little bit, we might perhaps say that this Europe is much more preoccupied with the distribution of appropriations from Brussels or exports of from cows suspected of madness. It is -despite the nice words it offers us from time to time- a rather egocentric Europe, caring more about immediate economic interests than about some global philosophizing. But there is also a third meaning of the word Europe. **This Europe represents a common destiny, a common, complex history, common values and a common culture of life. And more than that, it is also, in a way, an area characterized by a certain behavior, a certain sense of will and responsibility.** As a consequence, the borders of this Europe may sometimes be rather fuzzy or variable: they cannot be determined either by glancing in a school atlas or by studying the list of the member states of the European Union or of countries that could join the Union any time if they wanted to, such as Norway, Switzerland or Iceland. This is why talking about Europe in this sense of the word is more difficult, and occurs less often. And yet, **this is where all debates about Europe and its future should begin.** In other words, it appears that if not the most important point, then certainly the starting point of all our meditations at twilight should be a discussion about what Europe used to be and what it believed in now, what it should or could be, and what role it could play in the future.

Don't worry: I shall not spent the next few hours trying to answer these questions. Others are better equipped to do so, and they have already written countless books on this subject. I shall just mention a few features of Europe that, to my mind, deserve increased attention at this moment.

The first of these is that Europe in this third sense of the

word has always been and still is in essence one single and invisible political entity, though immensely diverse, multifaceted and intricately structured. This is not just a result of its geographical shape, with a concentration of many more or less related peoples on a relatively small peninsula and in its immediate vicinity. More importantly, the thousands of years of common history of its inhabitants, who often lived in differently formed multinational empires, have molded Europe into a single spiritual area, or sphere of civilization, interwoven by so many political connections that severing any one of them might, in certain cases, lead to its total disintegration.

This seemingly banal outward fact, however, has significant political consequences. Actually, it means that unless the future European order is based on a full awareness of this linkage and interconnectedness it could bring no success to anyone in the end. In the long run, we simply cannot imagine a Europe that, though no longer cut in two by the Iron Curtain, would be divided into a stable, prosperous and increasingly united Europe and a less stable and less prosperous Europe that would not unite. Just as it is impossible that one half of a room be forever warm and the other half cold it is equally unthinkable that two different Europes could for ever exist next to each other without detriment to both, and it is the more stable and more prosperous one that would pay the higher price. It is not that the uniting part of Europe would come to harm if it expanded. Just the opposite: in the long run, it would come to harm only if it failed to expand. As a phenomenon of civilization, Europe now has a chance unprecedented in its entire previous history: it can build its order on the basis of agreement among all those concerned, of equality and of peaceful and democratic cooperation. If it wastes this opportunity because of short term, purely individual or even predominantly economic interests alone, it will, as a whole, have to pay for it. Failure to grasp this opportunity would, in both halves of Europe, open the door to

all those who prefer confrontation rather than dialogue and who would rather define themselves as against others than as their neighbors. It is no good to pretend that people of this type do not exist any more. In other words: unless democrats proceed in a timely manner to build the internal structure of Europe as a single political entity, others will start building in their way – and the democrats could be left with only their eyes to cry with. The demons that so fatally affected European history -most disastrously in the twentieth century!- are biding their time. It would be a tragic error to forget about them because of some technicalities over funds, quotas or tariffs.

The European Union is an unprecedented attempt to forge Europe as a single area of democracy and solidarity. I know that neither the Union nor the North Atlantic Alliance can open themselves overnight to all those who aspire to join them. **What they undoubtedly can do -and should do before it is too late- is to give the whole of Europe as sphere that shares a body of values an unequivocal assurance that they are not closed clubs** and to formulate a clear and concrete conception of their gradual enlargement that would not only contain a timetable, but also explain the logic of that timetable. Six long years have passed since the fall of the iron Curtain and it makes no sense to deny that -in spite of certain promising partial steps- little has actually happened in this respect.

We have values that transcend the immediate interest

LET US now turn from the rather external matters to the fundamental ones. One of the great European traditions -a tradition that Europe seemed to be increasingly forgetting in the first half of the twentieth century- is the idea of the free citizen as the source of all power. Having learned a lesson from the horrors that were the fruit of fanatical nationalism, the free part of Europe after World War II rededicated itself to this European tradition and made that the foundation of its reconciliation and cooperation. Although

European integration began primarily as economic integration, it was nevertheless obvious what its political starting points were and what political objectives it pursued: it was, in fact, a great renaissance of the civic principle as the only possible basis for a truly peaceful cooperation among nations. **The matter was not to suppress national identity or national consciousness**, which is the one of the natural dimensions of every human identity, **but to free human beings from the bondage of national** collectivism -a source of all strife and an enslave of human individuality. It may sound paradoxical but European unification has never meant limitation of freedom in the sense of expropriation of certain rights of the citizen by an increasingly distant power. It has been just the opposite -a process enhancing people's freedom not only by liberating them from the fear of others but also by offering them ever more room for their self-realization as citizens. It seems to me that it is only now, with the European Union launching a new round of talks on its future and with discussion on its common foreign and security policy under way, that Europeans and European politicians are beginning to recognize the full magnitude of this deeply political dimension of the European unification process. And I wonder whether some of them are not a little daunted by the greatness of the work that has been undertaken and whose profound meaning is now emerging with such lucidity. Such loss of courage, if it exists, is all the more dangerous now, in the very moment when Europe has the chance I have just mentioned - the chance to order itself as a whole for the first time ever in history on the basis of democratic principles.

How can we counter this loss of heart? Where do we find the courage to pursue truly broad -minded solutions? How can we manage to look beyond our immediate and purely individual interests for the sake of a better future for the whole continent?

In my view, fairly little is needed, it would suffice to

remind ourselves of the anthem of the European Union. For doesn't Schiller's Ode to Joy offer an answer to this question when it points out that life in the holy circle of freedom requires taking an oath and a vow to the One who shall judge us above the stars? What else can this mean but **the fact that freedom and responsibility are two sides of a coin and that freedom is thinkable only when it is based on a sense of responsibility toward an authority that transcends us!**

The concept of metaphysically anchored sense of responsibility has been one of the cornerstone values underlying the European tradition. And it seems to me that the moment of twilight as an opportunity for self-reflection virtually invites us to rededicate ourselves to this European tradition and to admit clearly that there are values that transcend our immediate interest, that we are not accountable solely to our party, our voters, our lobbies or our state but in fact to the entire human race, including those who come after us, and that the decision on the worth of our deeds will ultimately be made beyond the realm of the mortals around us. In the language of today's world, this means nothing more than to harken, in our various dilemmas, to the voice that speaks to us from the depths of our conscience.

In a somewhat exalted way, we might say **the task of Europe today is to rediscover its conscience** and its sense of responsibility in the deepest sense of the word, not just with regard to its own political architecture but also with regard to the world as a whole.

We all know the threats that are hanging over today's world. We all know that our planet's resources are limited and that the idea of incessant economic growth must sooner or later clash with these limitations. We all know about the deepening gulf between the rapidly growing population of the poor and the stagnating population of the increasingly rich. We all know how we are destroying nature, the air and the waters that surround us. We all know how many potential conflicts lie

dormant amidst the humankind of today, now that one single global civilization is pushing people from different spheres of culture ever closer together, thus inevitably arousing their will to defend their identity against this conforming pressure.

But what do we do to avert these dangers or resist them? Very little, I am afraid. We withdraw into our shells, assuring ourselves that all this is not our affair. As if we had entirely forgotten the 'judge above the stars' of whom the European anthem reminds us. As if -while constantly talking about Europe- we were entirely forgetting one of the pillars of the European spiritual tradition -universalism, the commandment that we should think of everyone, act the way everyone should act for universally acceptable solutions.

Restoring the European Identity

HUMANKIND is entering an era of multipolar and multicultural civilization. Europe is no longer the conductor of the global orchestra. But this does not mean it has played out its role and has nothing to say to the world any more. A new task presents itself, and with it a new substance to Europe's very existence.

Europe's task will no longer be to spread -violently or non-violently- its own religion, its own civilization, its own inventions or its own power. Nor will it be to preach to the world about the rule of law, democracy, human rights or justice.

If Europe wants it can do something else, more modest yet more beneficial: through the model of its own being, **it can serve as an example that many diverse peoples can work together in peace without losing any part of their identity**; through its own behavior, it can show that it is possible to treat our planet considerately and to think also of the generations that will succeed us; it can demonstrate that it is possible to

live together in peace with other cultural worlds without a person or a state having to renounce themselves and their truth in the process. And more than that, if Europe wants it has one more possibility: **to remind itself of its best spiritual traditions** and the roots of these traditions, to look for what they have in common with the roots of other cultures and spheres of civilization and to join forces with others in a search for a common spiritual and moral minimum to guide us all so that we may live next to one another on one planet and jointly confront whatever threatens our life together.

Europe's task is no longer, nor will it ever be again, to rule the world, to disseminate by force its own concepts of welfare and of what is good, to impose its own culture upon the world or to instruct. The only meaningful task for the Europe of the next century is to be the best it can be, that is, to resurrect and imbue its life with its best spiritual traditions and thus help to shape creatively a new pattern of global coexistence. We shall do most for the world if we simply do as we are bidden by our conscience, that is, if we act as we believe everyone should act. Perhaps we will inspire someone as we do so, perhaps we won't. But we should not calculate on that outcome, it may be difficult to part with the belief that it makes no sense to live by an imperative from above as long as others do not live by it or are not prepared to, but it is possible. And it is not out of the question that this is actually the very best thing Europe can do also for itself, for the restoration of its identity, for its own new dawn.

To be able to take upon its shoulders, humbly and unostentatiously, the cross of this world, thus following the example of the One in whom it has believed for the past two millennia and in whose name it has, among other things, committed many an evil deed. Europe will probably first have to pause and reflect upon itself. If it does so, it will give

the best possible interpretation to the notion of twilight to which it allegedly owes its name.

(Subtitles and emphases added)