

Chapter 7

Culture, Knowledge and European Unity

Josef Jařab

Culture: So often “Last but not Least,”—and Yet Last

When Europe, for nearly half a century after World War II, was politically and economically divided into West and East it was the language of *culture* that still had the potential of remaining the common bond for nations on the continent. Especially for many people in the less lucky European countries knowledge of culture and cultural heritage, as well as recognition or awareness of common cultural values, served as *a living link to the freer world*. In those countries an outlet or outreach into the better, freer, world could be directed into the region’s history (such was the “rebellious“ emphasis on the tradition of pre-war Czechoslovakia of the first president of the country, T.G. Masaryk, or the embracement of the humanist legacy as embodied in the stories and essays of Karel Ěapek; it could also take one of various forms of admiration for modernist achievements of a number of artists who all became disowned by the official regime); another possibility was to reach out into “the other“ world in geographical terms (numerous, and often desperate, attempts to appropriate something relevant in the arts and cultural phenomena in the luckier Europe outside the “Iron Curtain”).

It may be worth a reminder that to Poles, Czechs, Slovaks or Hungarians the identification with an artistic heritage represented by Shakespeare, Villon, Goethe, Beethoven, Cézanne and other European geniuses came as a very natural attitude, often expressing their suppressed aspirations and ambitions. No wonder, then, that the dogmatic ideological reading of the continental as well as national cultural histories forced upon the public by the communist authorities through censorship, propaganda and educational programs turned this natural identification with great European and world culture into something

politically rather suspicious. And when it came to an interpretation of modernist art, from the western part of the continent and from America, as well as phenomena from the national cultural histories (such as the nonsensical ideological preference of Smetana to Dvořák and Janáček in Czech music) culture turned into a battleground for differences not just of taste but of political views as well—in other words, for many individuals and groups of people *culture became alternative politics*.

It should not be surprising, then, that the leading dissidents in the totalitarian world of the East were intellectuals, artists, musicians and writers who also, for decades, served as the “conscience of the nation,” in some cases intentionally and programatically, other times even against their own will. The persecuted musicians of the Plastic People of the Universe, the Charter 77 group of political activists which defended the rock band and protested against their persecution, and the Jazz Section organization which published western or forbidden books “for members only” thus bypassing censorship regulations are only a few examples illustrating the drama within the cultural and political battlefield. After all, the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 in Prague was immediately launched not by the masses of citizens but by students and theater people (which even our politicians have to be reminded of only fifteen years after the historic liberation took place).

Obviously, and understandably, western culture and the common European artistic heritage and presence were more important for nations within the “Iron Curtain” than those outside. Culture for those lacking freedom served more objectives and needs. And when the writers and artists from the East occasionally caught the attention of Western media and audiences, as it happened in the cases of Václav Havel, Jaroslav Seifert (the first Czech Nobel laureate for literature) or Milan Kundera (who later decided to comment on the situation back home from France) it was more for the authors’ political courage and the authenticity of their moral testimony on life experience unknown and possibly unimaginable for those enjoying liberty as a natural element of everyday reality than for their undeniable contribution to European cultural wealth.

There is still much to be learned from the body of literature and other artistic forms on the scope and depth of the European experience all through the continent in the decades of the immediate past—

hopefully to contribute to the development of a deeper and more authentic European identity. The vicarious human existence presented by artists in compelling stories should not be discarded as useless for our practical lives—they may be telling us of lives some people lived for us (so that we did not have to live them ourselves), lives worth emulating or following, but also fates definitely and happily to be avoided. Anyway, they offer numerous and various reflections on human life experience not to be forgotten—reflections on Europe as the cradle of some shining human values but also a place where barbarism of hardly imaginable scope took place.

So today, after the radical physical and geographical enlargement of the European Union, we should give proper consideration to the potential that culture and the arts of the previously divided parts of the continent can offer to the process of shaping also an *enlarged European mentality*.

What we expect as an outcome of such a process has been clearly and repeatedly described, even defined: we want a more united continent (peaceful and economically and politically more powerful), a continent capable, in every part of its vast territory, of a general respect for the existing cultural diversity which could and should be understood both as manifestation of a wealth storing human experience and a tool to be used to conciliate differences and overcome prejudices, even tensions. The diversity should be perceived less as an end in itself than a starting point for a possible outreach, and not just within but also beyond our continent. As for art, I believe that there is a natural tendency to *include rather than exclude* (unless it is abused for political or ideological reasons), that it is natural for culture to be ready to share its wealth with others. Thus, if we can introduce a sensible and generous cultural policy, culture can serve as a force, an undercurrent, in the process of political, economic and social unification. The basic tenor and general purport of such European *cultural* policy, however, should not be a cultural unification or creation of a new “European“ culture but a promotion of a larger sharing of Europe’s rich cultural diversity.

How are we doing so far? Not very convincingly, it seems. A 2004 article in the *International Herald Tribune* warned that unless a Europe moving toward “ever closer union” also “communicates culturally, popular taste will inevitably become ever more American.” The aut-

hor, Alan Riding, was astonished by the fact that Europeans show practically no interest in each other's contemporary art. And he was not referring only to movies, where the interest in American as against European films is simply overwhelming (not to mention films from eastern Europe, which do not practically exist in western distribution—and yet they could offer for relevant empirical and esthetic comparative experience). I would be the last person wanting to declare war on American popular culture, or even fall for superficial forms of anti-American feelings. As President of the European Association for American Studies for the past four years I kept prodding colleagues to study the phenomenon and reflect on its easy/uneasy relationship to democracy, both in the United States and in Europe. The Prague conference of European Americanists in April 2004 was to a large degree preoccupied, and dealt in scholarly seriousness, with exactly such complex issues.

In late summer of 2004 the Dutch Nexus Institute hosted a seminar in Berlin. Although the name of the event sounded quite encouragingly, namely, "Europe. A Beautiful Idea?" (the caution being expressed in the question mark), skeptical judgements and views tinged the debate. Accusations and self-accusations could be heard—as if we really did not believe in the relevance of culture, as if we gave up on belief in cultural values, perhaps on values in general. Or at least, as if we could not see any longer the vital connection between culture and quality, i.e. also variety and richness, of life. Questions were asked whether communities of people were not giving up on creativity and originality, on creative and inventive use of knowledge, whether there is not a danger of people giving in to intellectual laziness and emotional apathy, to pleasure, comfort and entertainment as primary goals of existence, whether humanity today is not too ready to accept the fact and the consequences of growing commercialization of all paths of lives.

Do we witness a crisis of civilization, of Western civilization, of American civilization, of European civilization? Or do we suffer a crisis of democracy when a steadily shrinking number of citizens bother to come to the ballot when given a chance to decide about their and their society's future? Such questions may sound unnecessarily negative, even desperate, yet they cannot easily be brushed away. Who is responsible for the state of affairs and what and who can help change

it for better? Would a stronger identification with Europe and the European idea (the idea of peace, prosperity and progress) be of help, and can it be enhanced and achieved? What role, in such a process (in such a campaign, if needed), would go to politicians, journalists, intellectuals, artists, teachers, educationists, researchers, citizens ...? I myself have arrived at one conclusion, namely that if we are indeed faced with critical situations, such as mentioned above, there certainly exist more than one entering point into the vicious circle that needs to be broken in search of a healthy solution, which means that hardly anyone can be absolved from participation in such a search.

But we can also take a more positive view of where we are at the moment in Europe, and project a future along a more optimistic perspective. There is the aspiration as expressed four years ago in the Lisbon agenda. There is the political ambition as expressed in the text of the Constitutional Treaty. There is the good will of many to pursue the vision of a European future. The effective and fruitful ways to be taken in such pursuit will certainly have to include culture and education. Intellectuals, artists, schools (above all universities) and media will have to help in presenting Europe as a challenge, societies and communities of citizens and their political representations will have to actively decide on priorities of ways to be followed and values to be pursued. Empty proclamations on the importance of education and culture will no longer do.

Here is just one example to think about. The recent enlargement of the European Union seems to be creating a lot of headaches for the European Parliament and other bodies having to provide translations and interpretations into more than twenty languages. It is found to be costly and demanding, which it certainly is. But do we have to see the situation as a problem only, could we not take it as an interesting challenge and consequently use it for launching a massive campaign for teaching and learning European languages, from English and French to Portuguese, Finnish and Slovak? (Probably also Latin). Additional philology departments and language schools would not just produce greater numbers of people able better to communicate outside their community and nation, the knowledge of other languages and thoughtfully designed educational programs would open new paths to the knowledge of other cultures. Such a large-scale program would certainly become self-generating in the future, it would also be a con-

tribution to the process of mind-opening still needed in many quarters of the continent. And as far as the practical outcome is concerned, I would dare predict that in a decade or so there would not necessarily be a need and demand (neither practical nor political and/or psychological, which is quite understandable today) for the use of all the languages at all times and for all purposes. Expensive program? Only if we think in short-term investments. If taken as one of the objectives in an “Education for Europe” project (and here we could discuss a whole list of items that would ensue from the targets stated in the Lisbon Agenda) such proposal should not be viewed as extravagant.

The vitality of culture will not be fully exploited if, in political and economic statements, projects and programs, culture remains relegated to marginal positions. If it continues to be a mere adornment, a “last but not least,”—and yet the last item on blueprints for the future. The “European educational and research area” (including such instruments as the Bologna process, the Erasmus mobility program, or the European Science Foundation projects, to name a few) seems to be already taken more seriously. But so will have to be perceived the shaping and creation of a *European cultural area* (through a massively promoted support of creativity, distribution and exchange of cultural products and values) as a *relevant political objective*, including the availability of necessary resources to be guaranteed. After all, why not agree that a certain obligatory, percentage of the GDP from all member states in their national budgets as well as from the European commission will be devoted to culture (and, for that matter, to education and research)?

Unless culture, in its complexity, is considered a key to life and the continent’s identity, instead of being a mere substitute for it, I am afraid that the European integration process cannot reach its true maturity, and the competitiveness of the European Union in all its facets will not be allowed to flourish fully. Such is my faith in the relevance of our cultural heritage and the knowledge and preservation thereof. Such is my faith in the cultivating and connecting force of culture—including not just Shakespeare, Rubens, Mozart and the wealth of national artistic traditions and fruits of regional folk lore, but also its contemporary forms and messages.