

Cultural Diversity: Obstacle or Help in Building European Unity?

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The cultural problems of a united Europe are discussed and the difference between the genesis of US and EU are described. Positive aspects of the multicultural character of Europe are shown, and it is discussed how to use them. The dangers of surface syncretism are opposed with the cultivation of local cultures. Formal tolerance is then shown as vulnerable in comparison with mutual understanding based on an underlying sameness of the variety of European cultures. Language differences are used as a main illustration in the whole argumentation. Finally, it is claimed that the education for democracy should be anchored in much better education of the first and other languages as well as in the profound knowledge of local culture.

Keywords: united Europe, integration, civic education, language differences.

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La diversidad cultural: ¿obstáculo o ayuda para la construcción de la unidad europea?

En este artículo se examinan los problemas culturales de una Europa unida, haciendo hincapié en la diversa génesis de los EE.UU. y la Unión Europea. Se incide en los aspectos positivos derivados del carácter multicultural de Europa y en cómo servirse de ellos. Posteriormente, se contraponen el peligro de un sincretismo superficial con el arraigo de las culturas locales arraigadas. De este modo, se perciben las debilidades de una tolerancia puramente formal que es lo contrario de un entendimiento mutuo fundado en las semejanzas profundas de las diversas culturas europeas. Para ello, se toma la diversidad lingüística como un ejemplo que ilustra lo esencial de la línea argumental del artículo. Por último, se sostiene que la educación para la democracia tiene que fundarse en un mejor conocimiento tanto de la lengua materna como de otras lenguas, además de en un profundo conocimiento de la cultura nacional.

Palabras clave: unidad europea, integración, educación cívica, diversidad lingüística.

OUR GENERATION WAS GIVEN a great gift to experience a long period peace and a unique chance to participate in the process of building a united Europe. Both were but a dream for our predecessors. Such a dream, however, appeared several times, both in the form of humanistic utopias and powerful megalomania. Our present chance remains a chance, because neither peace, nor unity have been reached in full. After the World War II Europe suffered many local wars and the EU is still in a nascent state.

The idea of a united Europe could be realized due to a certain development of mankind. It is much more a child of technological progress than of an effort of politicians. They helped and their contribution is indisputable. The main engine, however, is the strong stream of technologies. Automatisation has changed every industry. The digital revolution has pushed all bureaucratic, marketing and logistical systems onto a higher plane incomparable with what came before. Atomic energy, among other inventions, changed the frame of thinking in which a war must be understood as a worldwide suicide. It is natural then, that the time of local history is over and the gate of global history is definitely opened. Globalization is the unavoidable consequence of human progress and economic needs force governments, statesmen and diplomats to act in accordance with the technological stream.

1. Basic differences in building the united Europe and the United States

As concerns Europe it is clear that it will either develop in one large state and in the power comparable with other continent-size states and will become their equal partner, or it will be a historical museum, that may be protected for its cultural treasures, but undoubtedly an outsider. Western Europe realized this a long time ago, and the idea of a united Europe was expanded into Central (and some Eastern) countries shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Strangely enough, even the western founding countries, to say nothing about the new members, have not enough strength of will to create a federal state of the US type. The idea of the EU remains unfinished. Europeans hesitate before strange questions such as: *Is it possible to be a power and meanwhile to have a consortium of 20 foreign ministers?* In this and many other questions, Europe behaves like a child claiming a square circle. They want both unity and an independent sovereignty. The cause of this is the burden of history. Europe is definable only in contrast to other worlds, such as

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the US or Far or Middle East. Observed from the inside, Europe is a multicultural domain with a huge variety of languages, traditions, national memories and so on. European history is full of wars solved by weapons. Local and regional conflicts filled the lives of many generations; personal biographies without an experience of an attack, intervention or revenge did not exist among those who reached adulthood. Experiences with neighboring nations were full of bloody events and mutual hatred. Nationality and religion were the prevailing signs of difference. Overwhelming Christianity was not enough to prevent tensions rising; Europe acted as one when threatened from the outside. Pride and prejudices poisoned European society deeply and a lack of confidence gave birth to sayings such as *believe in peace but keep the powder dry*.

With this historical burden it is, of course, not possible to repeat what happened in North America (Pi'ha, 2005). It could be argued that in the same way the loaded society from Europe came to America. It is but a partial truth. The European heritage was of course strong enough to cause European fights in the new territories such as French-English ones, or to cause no small difficulties among different churches. Stronger than this, however, were certain similarities among new arrivals. They were altogether marginal in their home countries, faced with rough life conditions under which cooperation was a question of survival. They also left European life behind them bringing, however, something from their traditions. Therefore, they gradually formed a *new* society with a *new* history in a *new* country. Finally, they erected a democratic consensus and started to build a lasting democracy. What should be mentioned is that, although they used a very rational way of thinking, practical and pragmatic, they consciously accepted the trust in God as the deepest base of all human projects. Present day European society seems unable to do this. Two centuries of progressing secularisation have made it almost impossible. There is also too great a change in religious ideas and their connection to human rights. For the founding fathers in the US, religion was something very natural. Although we can dispute the spiritual dimension of religious life in US, we must accept that it exists and plays a role in the life of individuals as well as of the whole society (Uhlenbeck, 1993). What Europeans proudly and stupidly criticise as mere gestures are, however, signs of religious ideas that *do matter* (Pi'ha, 2006). Europe on the contrary has lost its religious anchor. Europe is afraid to speak about Christianity as about a sign in its coat of arms (Weigel, 2004).

Europeans, of course, have had enough bad experiences with religious wars and confessional ideologies. They try to be wise and to avoid any religious tension. Their position in this matter seems to be a repetition of two great mistakes from the past. Before World War I nationalism was discussed as an obsolete problem existing –if at all– among less educated people. After World War I there existed a similarly stupid and dangerous dream, that there are no ethnic differences.

This effort to lie out of the problem is accompanied with another phenomenon. The fight for human rights has had a long tradition in Europe as the fight for human freedom and absolute independence. European society rejected God and/or any similar point of reference, as something limiting human freedom. The consequences are far-reaching. Because the majority of European citizens shared this idea, Christianity could not be the European identification mark. Casting Christianity among historical relics, Europe is left with no leading idea. There is, of course, a certain decline of religious life in all developed countries, there is also a new life style connected with it. But the difference between Americans and Europeans is that the former are ready to do something with social problems because in the end they trust in God and see limits in the rights of the individual; the latter are unable to take a step, because they are captivated by God's responsibility they have taken into their own hands.

The present state of affairs in Europe could be roughly summarised in three points:

- The stream of globalisation pushes Europe towards integration.
- Integration is jeopardised by almost genetic distrust among European nationalities.
- European society is afraid to use Christianity as a base of its cultural diversity.

2. What might happen in this situation?

As to the first one, we could predict several things. Huge migration of people and namely young people together with a common market will, or at least could, cause cultural syncretism similar to the helenistic decline of ancient Rome. One positive outcome might then be that historical memory will be forgotten. Forgotten is neither solved nor healed however. It is only pushed aside and could reappear suddenly and rigorously. The negative outcome would be the observable decline of morals already, the loss

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of a principal idea and the consequent weakness of society. Hedonistic society is always an easy prey. Another negative might be also a boring uniformity caused by the neglect of local and national cultures.

We could experience a sudden death of European languages (Uhlenbeck, 1993) which might be replaced by some *European English*. Such a lingua franca could even influence British English. Similarly, we could be faced with a strong pollution of national languages that will survive within each high local culture but will suffer Anglobarbarisation in common use.

It could happen that the new syncretic European society will develop a new culture and even a new doctrine replacing Christian religion. It also could adopt some religion as a moral base. In a demographic vacuum, Europe could easily become a religion of immigrants. An Islamic Europe seems possible, although it sounds like a *contradictio in terms*.

It looks like the natural stream of development –if left uncontrolled– will bring us to the end of a Christian European culture. What will then be an idea strong enough to create a new culture in a way Christianity has been in ruins of Hellenistic Rome is difficult to say.

3. What can we consciously do?

This not very nice vision sharpens another question. Can we do something about it? There are already many efforts to help Europe not to disintegrate. Under different names such as *civic education*, *democratic education*, *prosocial education*, *ethics education* and so on, a new doctrine for a future Europe is taught about all over the continent. There is both great hope and deep scepticism about it. Hope is based on the belief in the power of compulsory education, in the positive law and democratic frame valid in Europe. Scepticism points at the prevailing shortcomings of any education manifested by a growing moral crisis, on a consequent dysfunction of laws and justice and on the decline of social activities among citizens.

The main reason for little results lies in the lack of basic morals. The new doctrine promoted the concepts as tolerance, freedom, and individual rights so high, that any individual becomes the central point of the world, and is allowed to do anything, and is tolerated according to their wish and power. It is hardly possible to meet any results in building a society from selfish egotistic individuals. The present European doctrine has nothing ahead of which people are

really equal and must restrict themselves. The moral imperative if put into the hands of people is either a dictatorship or nothing. An effort to replace Christian Decalogue with science would not help. The engine of science is hesitation (Pi'ha, 2002) and a permanent new questioning undermines any valid truth. It brings great and positive progress but it is not applicable to the lives of people and society. Hesitation there is changed into a lack of confidence spelling the end of any cooperation and cohabitation. Society and all individuals also lose orientation because there is no fixed point of reference.

What else could be done? We could try to use education to transmit basic valid morals, because it is a strong weapon. To be effective it must be consistent and coordinated. All those who are directly responsible must cooperate: schools, parents, and educators in any organisation. Also those who are not directly responsible but who have an influence on the young generation must help. The teaching of basic morals is the duty of the whole of society. No institution could be successful when surrounded by an amoral society. Moral renewal is an important precondition.

Moral education must be based on an unshakeable set of principles. These principles could hardly have any other form than imperative commands or demands. The Christian Commandments are known and are effective to a point. What should be done is to explain its imperative as something that protects people and their way of life. To explain the commandments Decalogue in the form of moral implications seems to be the proper way. If you do not protect your life, you will die.

We can also try to avoid the negative features of syncretism and consciously use all positive features of diversity present in Europe. Diversity has many advantages as well. Unity presumes diversity, because the unity of the sameness is uniformity. The difference is that the latter is given from the outside, while the former from the inside. Reaching a uniformity could cause far-reaching damage of democracy. Similarly, a dialogue is possible only when distinctive knowledge is present.

4. Two important goals of education

In building European unity there are two important goals of education. The first is overstressed. That is to take care of the technocratic unification and the legislative part of it. Thus the stream of syncretism is promoted. The second seems to be rather neglected. Intensive care of cultural diversity is, however, much more

important. Because cultural differences are strongly manifested by languages I shall use in the following explanation mainly languages as an illustration of what should be done.

At superficial level we experience the difference of languages as an obstacle in communication. In fact, these differences could be considered as something very positive. Language as such is not only a communication tool, but also a certain pattern of thinking. The national language is shared not only as a tool of communication but also as a kind of a law valid for all native speakers. There are languages explicitly expressing this while naming foreigners as those who do not master the local language calling them “*mut*” (Czech *N'mci*) or *blabbling* (Greek *barbaroi*). As such they were not allowed to make any contribution to governmental decisions. They remained either foreign guests or slaves with no citizen rights.

I shall not broadly argue why language plays such an important role as it might be linguistically rather difficult to explain in detail and irrelevant to our topic (Malinowski, 1923). There are three reasons (Lakoff, 1987). The first one is grammatical categories that are as well the first categorisation of the world. So there are distinguished words for actions (verbs) and words for things (nouns). There are also names for qualities of both of them (adverbs and adjectives) and so on. Nouns are categorized according to their grammatical gender, which although arbitrarily assigned in many European languages and often not coinciding with sex, are, however, connected with real categories of sex and aliveness so firmly that we somehow feel an additional but conceptually underlying factor even when we deal with nouns purely arbitrarily put into a category of masculine or feminine. It might have quite far-reaching consequences. In the majority of European languages the name of *death* is a feminine noun, but in German and some other languages it is a masculine. A somewhat euphemistic conception of the same reality connected with the female category is strongly opposed to masculinity in the given example. Differences in our imagination reflect this difference. In Czech art, for example, there are expressions such as *mother death* while death is often represented as a lady consoling a dying person in her arms. Death is known as an embarrassment. There are quite different patterns in German paintings. Death often takes the form of a soldier. Sometimes, we are close to say that the masculine death is more active, because it kills while the feminine death is more perceiving, because it accepts or harvests the ripe life (Pi'ha, 1998).

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The second reason dwells in different etymologies positing words into different semantic fields and consequently pointing up different qualities of a denoted part of reality. So in many languages the word *matter* shows that it is something from which everything is made and consequently something from which everything originates. In Czech, however, the word *hmota* is used etymologically connected with the verb *hmatat* (*to touch, palpate*) highlighting that matter is palpable; it is something that we experience through touch. Similarly, many fixed metaphors, idioms and sayings differ from language to language.

The last reason is different intonations of all kind. Their role is also both profound and far-reaching. Intonations are expressions of mood and feelings. On another scale they are responsible for national songs, their emotional impact, and for the culture of music as such.

Realising all of that we can better understand how difficult it is to understand a foreign language. It has never been just a superficial translation of words and sentence patterns. It has also always been a deep tectonic trembling of two differently structured minds. This fact might be (and is indeed) a strong argument for the negative role of the variety of European languages. We could conclude that people cannot fully understand each other across the language barriers.

On the other hand these difficulties force us to search for profound understanding that is afterwards much more a solid base for any agreement. The reason why two native speakers so often experience crisis in their understanding is that they did not reach a more profound understanding of others and slipped on an easy surface. A better understanding of others is, of course, the quality of a well educated person both in terms of culture and democratic citizenship. Present day easy language training should be enriched by a deeper insight into the underlying system of thinking in the foreign language. Although it is evident, we must remember that even greater care should be given to the first language (Pi'ha, 1998).

Knowledge of more than one language enriches the speaker with a much more plastic picture of reality and brings him more valid knowledge. Knowledge of other languages has always been a sign of education not only because of the ability to communicate with broader sets of people, but primarily because of multiple literacy and a broader horizon of knowledge. The deeper insight and wisdom, which is the most important consequence of knowledge of more

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languages, is usually left in a shadow of interest. We can, however, name at least three thinkers who were aware of this. In modern times Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger should be mentioned, both using language as a way to a deeper recognition of reality. In earlier times the Czech thinker and pedagogue J.Á. Comenius, well known for his didactic works, named his most popular book *Janua linguarum reserata*. The pragmatic society of enlightenment used it only as the best didactic tool for second language acquisition. Teachers then did not even discover the homonymous title, reading it as a *gate open towards languages*. The more important reading of *an open gate of languages* which leads to the deeper knowledge of reality remained unused. Comenius, however, used this gate to lead his pupils towards a deeper understanding of reality. Languages for him serve a more honest goal, bearing a tool to reach wisdom.

Absorbing languages and representing local cultures, local desires and certain point of view, show us how differently the same reality could be shaped. All kinds of other cultural appearances including art, folklore, and institutions do the same. To care about local cultures (maybe even those that are not known as the national ones) is indispensable in building united Europe. Only in their depth we can find what is really common. Only by accepting this common as something that is *ours* can we overpass the danger of formal tolerance. Only by admitting that the same principle might be formed differently could we avoid unnatural uniformity. Only by enjoying foreign cultures as *ours* due to sharing the underlying sameness, could we be rich, proud and self-confident. Only as self-confident people can we cooperate, because we shall add something that is almost personally *ours*. Namely, the small countries and new members of the EU must play their distinguished role. Only by bringing all that we were fighting for so cruelly, for centuries, into a shared treasure of Europeanism could we change the European inner history from the history of victories and defeats, towards a history of co-operation that is the history of those who build and create. It will not be an absolutely new history, because traces of cooperation and mutual enriching are detectable as bounding streams of what we call European culture.■

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