

"Know thyself"
– an Essay on the Role and Mission of PEN.

The literary seminars held at Bled each year, for close to four decades, have provided rich food for thought and wisdom on issues such as nationality, identity and humanity. Reality itself has made its presence felt. Without ignoring events elsewhere, the countries of the Balkans bear to a frightening extent witness to the primitive forces connected with these concepts, throughout the centuries, as empires have risen and collapsed.

Yes, I will call them primitive, which is not in any way to deny their social and political force. They are primitive in that they express forces embedded within the very structures of human society and the human mind. Built on instinctive cooperation, once a dire necessity for survival, security, procreation and care, they are forces which create and uphold the need for 'belonging' to something – a family, a clan, a tribe, and later the imponderables of belief systems and religions.

These forces are easily recognized as the prime factors for social mobilization. Uniting societies together, providing them with an 'identity' and often also a 'destiny', as well as the symbolic language in which to express 'the cause'. These are the building blocks of political activism. Sometimes linked to territory, sometimes to language, often to tradition, history and imagined honour, these become the tools of politicians for purposes that can equally be honourable or sinister. Often at the same time, depending on your perspective - yours or your neighbour's.

It is not possible to advance the discourse on these matters without mentioning 'the material base' of societies. I know many become very careful about a terminology which associates to Marxism, but my basic point would be that economic systems – and especially capitalism - have had no true analytical critic equal to Karl Marx. His theories and the solutions he proposed are now outdated but there can be no denying that to understand the dynamics of capitalism in human societies, Marx still provides essential reading.

Anyhow, in attempting to create a new future through political cooperation instead of war, Jean Monnet and others founded the political entity now called the European Union. With two world wars as a background experience, its' historic ideals can in shorthand be listed as to disarm nationalism, to harness capitalism, and to promote individual networking across borders in all spheres of economic and civic society.

Whatever its shortcomings, its' record of achievements hasn't been that bad. But it would be too bad if this would lead any onlooker into believing that peace and prosperity are just around the corner. The global tug of war over material resources such as food, energy and oil is an ongoing process. So are the appeals for mobilisation founded on nationality, identity and belonging. Let us therefore pause in order to give these concepts some close thought, as earlier Bled seminar papers have amply done.

When and under what circumstances can 'nationalism' be taken as positive? The nation state is nowadays taken as 'the' natural state for large-scale social organization. It is rhetorically linked to a history, which defines success in terms of territory. This is because the state itself is defined by the outreach of its' laws: this side of the border, - our laws; other side, somebody else's. And the laws control ability to extract resources from the territory. This, incidentally,

was clearly seen by Marx, and equally clearly linked to the development of the economic system through various phases of capitalism through to imperialism.

But now, however entrenched nation states may seem, if they very definitely are part of the problem in the world today, are they equally capable of becoming part of the solution? To my mind, - no: not without the assistance of democratic civic society itself. Our perspective must shift from the generalised collective to the individual, and the ultimate importance of the individual and his or her contribution to 'the education of the mind', to use a Victorian phrase which actually fits in quite nicely.

I think it would be well to underline that the first key to analysis must be to differentiate between 'nation' and 'state'. State should be a concept linked to and defined by citizenship, - and laws, equal for all. Nations are concepts which to a very unfortunate extent are tied to historic tradition and constructs of language and religion and upheld by national mythology and symbolism, of which flying the flag is probably the most evident. 'Nation-building', this positive-laden concept, is unhappily most often built of the very false preconceptions of 'sameness', and the stress is on the differences of the neighbour, ultimately creating 'the Other'. The human tragedies of 'ethnic cleansing' have been with us for centuries, although sometimes hidden by the dust of history and induced ignorance.

Thus, my first question in this context, given that the overwhelming majority of us are firmly born into "identity" and the associated concept of "loyalty", is how to tackle the problems of loyalty, which so often becomes blind, unquestioning or simply collectively overwhelming. Let us do so by deconstructing the concept beyond good or bad; focussing on the question: must it forever remain the same?

The concept of identity is a multi-layered construction. Inherited belief systems, implanted from our very first days; social behaviour concerning family, elders, equals and gender go hand in hand with language and linguistic concepts, which reinforce traditional values. Growing up is a painful experience when these values are challenged – and equally inevitably necessary for maturity and human development. One comforting conclusion seems evident: we ourselves as individuals change; we are never the same over time, and neither need our basic values be. This is the core discussion of educational systems in all societies: how do we define their role in relation to 'traditional values'? Do we put a premium on preaching tradition, or do we promote change and challenging free thought? And where do we find the balance, as balance must be, tied as we are to a time-line concept of continuity?

Following the discussion of the past two centuries in the Western world, the middle ground of consensus has, as far as 'values' are concerned, moved from 'tradition' to 'the relative'. I believe the main challenge of Westernised societies is, in its' teachings, to accommodate the basic realisation that our world is in every sense of the word 'relative'. The justification of this is in what I believe professional philosophers would call 'the context of consequential ethics'. The ultimate way of evaluating and judging acts or deeds are through evaluating their consequences. Only this kind of relativity allows our minds to find new solutions to old problems. Only relativity allows us to redefine ourselves, - and to redefine 'the Other'. As we cannot deny this relativity, we should learn to embrace it.

I wish it were true that such an insight, presented in many differing ways by philosophers and contemporary observers, also could be a shortcut to 'solutions'. It isn't. The tug of war within our souls continues, as the flags of loyalty are being waved and the trumpets of tribalism tell

us action must be taken imminently, and yet at the same time our individual conscience could wish us to pause and reflect on the balance between selfish national advantages and 'the global common good'. Que faire?

At this point our thanks are due to an earlier generation, which gave us one of the major social institutions of our times, the United Nations as a forum for discussion, diplomacy – and ultimately also action. We might wish it could prevent war, pestilence and famine, as much as we might wish an Almighty God to do the same. But the ultimate solutions and associated actions are always, as the founding fathers of the UN and UNESCO recalled, "in the minds of men", in ourselves, as human beings called upon to take responsibility for the world around us.

The heritage of the Age of Enlightenment provided the challenge, which to me brings the focus of the presentation back to the role of PEN in the Contemporary World. The 'relativisation' of our concept of the world, our 'Weltanschauung' or overriding belief system, points to one absolutely central philosophical problem: where can we find a common ground of global values to stand on, when traditional ethical authorities become too tied to religion to be of universal value – with due deference to the ambitions of most religions to be universal?

As we immediately recognize that no easy answer will present itself on this subject, I think anyone with a relativistic inclination will choose 'dialogue' before 'preaching'. It is not the truths handed down by tradition that should guide us, but a dialogue framed to discern the alternatives available, to be followed by free choice between actions and consequences.

PEN holds no ambition to replace the democratic choice of politics. Our ambition must be to enhance the free and fair dialogue necessary for responsible action. To provide spaces for dialogue free from outside collective pressure. To arrange meeting-places for discussions that encourage alternative solutions and ensure the distribution of ideas thus created. This, it seems to me, is also the core spirit of the recent decades of Slovene PEN, now celebrating its 80th anniversary, with special emphasis on experience gathered of dialogue across the once overwhelming presence of the Iron Curtain, followed by the nationalism of the nineties.

Space for reflection... Creative humanistic dialogue shares with academic discourse the necessity of critical self-reflection. Meeting others, articulating, assessing, and encouraging publishing. This is by all human experience a time-consuming process. Ideas, concepts, attitudes take time to be shaped, to sink in and to be assimilated. My belief is still that there is no medium for this thought-process that can replace the book, and that literature most often is a more efficiently mind-stimulating medium than most others combined. No other medium allows us to argue on behalf of 'the Other' with such permanency and human compassion. Again an existential basis for PEN.

This task of promoting dialogue and literature is quite emphatically never-ending: the relativity of our world will force us to discard utopian final solutions in favour of what philosopher Karl Popper simply called 'social engineering by small steps'. As non-decision-making is seldom action-neutral, and doing nothing can be worse than even guesswork action, we as political beings are cautioned never to take actions which are totally irreversible. Good-bye to the idea of 'total solutions'. Good riddance also to any rhetorical reference that 'the end justifies the means'. The means, said Popper, tend to be awful, and the ends destructive.

I will not take time in discussing the benefits of free speech; this Right would not be in the UN Declaration of Human Rights if it were not deemed indispensable for civilised societies. I will move directly to the interesting fact that free speech is tempered by some core ethical values in the PEN Charter. Earlier generations of PEN members reached the conclusion that we could not do without a code of behaviour, which makes the participants free to reach out with the confidence that the dialogue is built on trust and good intention. Let us recall the relevant passages from the Charter text:

3. *Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds, and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world.*

4. *PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organized political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.*

Voluntary restraint. Freedom tempered by personal responsibility. These sentiments point directly to PEN's global mission in the world: to create spaces for dialogue, intent on making 'the Other' visible and comprehensible; intent on listening and learning, not preaching; keenly sensitive to the fact that respect for the individual is the only acceptable base for social action; and protecting and promoting all circumstances which can make the reflective individual heard, translated and published.

This is why PEN can play a distinctive role in our contemporary world. As a role model guided by ethics. Not the ethics of command, but of those of common sense, respect and compassion. For all countries, all languages, all persuasions.

In 18th-Century Sweden, the botanist Carl von Linné conceived of the name 'homo sapiens' for the human species among the primates. He also had a favourite quote. It was the "know thyself" of the Oracle of Delphi. If we combine the two we surely have the main argument as to why we must feel compelled to strive towards achieving a free flowing self-reflexive dialogue. With that in mind, 'homo' might actually become 'sapiens'. If PEN should have any role for the future, it should surely be to continue to be a role model for this discourse on 'la condition humaine'. Only through the mirror of "the Other" shall we ever get know ourselves.

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