

Modernity

Introductory speech, Minsk July 2002.

International PEN was created over 80 years ago to establish PEN Centres wherever independent writers might want to establish them, basically following the principle of one Centre in each country. PEN clubs – called clubs because Members were elected on a declaration of allegiance to the humanistic values of what later became our Charter document – rapidly emerged all over the world. They provided a meeting space for writers to discuss literature and problems associated with literature. It was international irrespective of nationality – the writer was never seen as a representative of his nation, much less his or her government; no, the writer was seen as an individual, as a personality who wrote in the language of his or her choice. But through PEN had an international platform of hospitality wherever he or she might be in the world.

We are now more than 130 Centres in more than 90 countries. We are a modern, independent NGO, based on democratic and transparent local organizations in a field network, across the globe, second to none. There is no organization like PEN, and certainly none as old and as experienced as PEN.

Today, we are in formal cooperation with UNESCO because of overlapping ideals. We are proud and independent in this cooperation, which indeed has the dual aims of ‘promoting literature, defending freedom to write’, but also has a second – but no secret – agenda. This is the agenda of ‘Modernity’.

When social scientists evaluate the world around us, and all the various countries involved in global politics today, the key concept is development. What makes some countries and nations develop their capacities so that they achieve sustainable economic growth and thus socially oriented welfare societies? What makes others lag behind, often in a frightening negative spiral of depression, repression and stagnation? How explain in depth the relative success of the Western European countries – including the former Atlantic colonies which became the United States – in comparison with other empires throughout the ages of world history?

The concept of ‘modernisation’ catches these deep rooted attitudes that have allowed this development. ‘Secularisation’ is one concept; – the escape from belief systems, mainly under the cloak of religion, that so easily become dominant, repressive and intolerant. Three hundred years of religious wars taught Western Europe the lesson that religion – and the eternal quest for ‘belonging’ in a spiritual sense - should be tempered by respect for other belief systems. Tolerance in issues of religion is one aspect of modernity.

Another is the acceptance of individualism. At first encompassing legal aspects; a person had both duties and rights, according to Law equal for all. A natural development was then equal

opportunity to influence the Law ; and the road to democracy – a road we still travel – based one man, one vote, emerged as inevitable logic.

Interestingly enough, individualism has a long-hidden or under-estimated component, namely the right to freely associate. Brilliant studies of different societies has brought out the significance of what started as guilds and companies a few hundred years ago, but today are recognised as an incredible number of NGO's; non-governmental organizations. Characterised by individuals pursuing their common interests in whatever field it may be. The individual need not be lonely; indeed, to influence his life-chances, association was inevitable. And thus respect for the marvellous complexity of 'Civil society' emerges alongside party political democracy.

The influence of economics on development have long been noticed by scholars. Karl Marx' analysis and critique of Western Capitalism is essential reading. But history has shown that his – and Lenin's – recommendation of 'what to do' was at fault; they underestimated the forces of Civil society, the rule of Law, democracy and the ability of humans to influence the social development of their societies.

Today, I only wish to underline the importance of independent NGO's in the development of Civil society. We know now that they in themselves are key to development, indeed, to Modernity, to a democratic 'Open Society under the Rule of Law'. The challenge is clear: repression and stagnation as one course of action, or the alternative: independent NGO's, civil rights - and development.

This is why International PEN is proud to cooperate with UNESCO in building civil society. National Writer's Unions you will find in every country. International PEN is not in competition with them anywhere – International PEN offers something else. International PEN offers a circle of global solidarity as we pursue our causes as writers and journalists. We recognise that writing is often a very lonely profession, and journalism sometimes a very exposed profession. This is when solidarity counts.

International PEN thus not only provides an international platform for writers to promote their own language and literature, it also offers intellectual and sometimes even material solidarity. It recognises that progress, decency and international respect it tightly bound to respect for the personality of the individual. Indeed, this is perhaps the core element in the concept of 'Modernity' – a combination of both individualism and solidarity. Our task, as members of International PEN, is never to forget this everlasting intellectual obligation we have to the Age of Enlightenment – long past, never fully accomplished. Let us face this challenge with courage and determination, and let it colour the quality of writers and what we write; be it as Poets, Essayists or Novelists -or Journalists..

Thankyou.

Terry Carlbom
International Secretary

