

New Europe - Five Years Old*

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It is customary to award a prize when a festive recapitulation of merits is in order, when the accomplishments of a life-long career are to be celebrated.

Often enough, prizes turn out to be the waiting room of a mausoleum. The recipient of an award therefore has every reason to feel melancholic: for him who is celebrated and awarded honors the end lies not too far ahead... From this point of view the 'New Europe' prize is the very opposite of the customary.

The prize was born in order to make something possible rather than to celebrate some achievement. It was an 'inaugural' prize, a blank check, the raw material for a new beginning: not a reward but an investment. Those who have established it have taken a risk - which is hardly the case with an award.

The reason for our being here together is to find out how much the risk initially taken has paid off.

In Bucharest the 'New Europe' prize was used to set up a small 'center of advanced studies': the 'New Europe College' is the first of this kind in Romania. The idea was to create an environment in which ten scholars selected every year through open competition, could carry on their research and could enjoy working conditions similar to those already existing in the West.

A second program, established last autumn, is meant to contribute toward a more rapid and less painful re-adjustment to the local milieu of those scholars who, after having completed longer study stages abroad, have taken the somewhat inexplicable decision to return home.

Along with a stipend for books and travels, they receive adequate electronic equipment; their return to the local academic life may thus be no longer sensed as some sort of irreversible exile.

Both programs address specific, context-generated needs such as the diminution of the 'brain-drain' process, the synchronization of local scientific endeavors with those in advanced countries and the development of closer contacts between the respective scientific communities, as well as the stimulation of transdisciplinary dialogue.

For every 'society in transition', as are those in Central and Eastern Europe and Romania in particular, these are, indeed, urgent needs. To put it briefly, the fulfillment of such urgent needs pertains to the process of 'normalization'.

One might as well say that, as far as Eastern Europe is concerned, the meaning of the word 'normalization' is more obscure than it may seem at first glance. Let me give you one example:

Nicolae Grigorescu, the founder of 'modern' painting in Romania, set off, at the age of ten, as an icon-painting apprentice in a traditional local workshop. The year was 1848, mind you, and Byzantine art, however late its expression, had long become a thing of the past. In about 1858 Grigorescu, then in his early twenties, practiced a religious wall painting which was already neo-classical in style. In 1861 the artist left for Paris to study under Gleyre (the well-known academic master whose studio Renoir also visited at that time), only to break away a few months later in order to join the open-air painters then active in Barbizon. In less than twenty years Grigorescu's approach and style spectacularly evolved from those typical of post-Byzantine art to those of the forerunners of Impressionism, that is to say, in that short span of time the artist had come to a point which it had taken western art and artists centuries of development to reach.

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Such breath-taking burning down of stages, such propensity for making huge leaps, for reform accomplished at an incredibly rapid pace, within one single generation, at times even by one single individual, in a word such pathetic anomaly is called, in the case of Romania, normalization.

Keeping proportions, I am tempted to say that, to this very day, it is this sort of gap-bridging that one expects of eastern Europeans. As an institution of normality, New Europe College is the perfect embodiment of the “psychology of the leap”, of radical renewal. Whereas the substance of renewal, happily, already existed within the local intellectual milieu, what was at stake was to mobilize it and to create a framework which would enable it to efficiently express itself. Indeed, this is what was attempted with the generous means offered by the 'New Europe' prize and with the support of various organizations such as Volkswagen-Stiftung, Stifterverband, Landis & Gyr, Schweitzer EDA, and Soros.

Novelty may be acknowledged in figures.

Accommodated first in one room, then in a garden, later in a flat, and only as of this summer in a more comfortable head office, and with a permanent staff of five, New Europe College has managed to administrate through the two aforementioned programs, a total of sixty grants from 1994 to this day. Forty-seven of the grantees are based in Bucharest, the remaining thirteen are based throughout the country; thirty-two are active in the field of higher education, twenty-eight in research (let it be said that in Romania the two areas are still heterogeneous). There have been thirty-eight male and twenty-two female grant recipients so far (a ratio which proves we are not indifferent to the risks of genre discrimination and that our College is well ahead of the Romanian government and Parliament whose structures reveal an overwhelmingly male grip on power).

Subjects approached until now pertain to the areas of (in decreasing order): language studies, linguistics, and history (first place), philosophy and history of art (second place), religion and political studies (third place); the ratio of economic studies, biology, psychiatry, and pedagogical studies has been less significant. Twenty-eight distinguished foreign professors have participated in the discussions, seminars, and evening lectures organized by New Europe College; among them I would like to mention Yehuda Elkana, Wolf Lepenies, Hans Belting, Jacques Derrida, Stephen Holmes, Pierre Aubenque, Adam Michnik, Timothy Garton Ash, Iso Camartin, Jacques Rupnik, Fritz Wagner, Heinrich Ursprung. We have organized also two international symposia, '*Bucharest - Another Europe*' in 1995, and '*Kitsch in Periods of Transition*' in 1997. Every year a volume containing the studies of the New Europe College grantees is edited (one has been published, two are under press), and important publishing houses abroad have taken over the studies of our grantees for publication (Desclée de Brouwer, Peter Lang, Vrin, The Edwin Mellen Press, Institut für Soziosemiotische Studien Wien).

Participants in the 'Relink' program organize student seminars on a regular basis either at the College or at the various universities they are associated with. I might as well add that the College bestows a steadily growing reference library, comprising roughly 3,000 books, of which many are not to be found in other public libraries around the country. The College also runs a PC network consisting of 12 PCs and 3 laptops. Whoever has been acquainted, no matter how briefly, with the working conditions prevailing in Eastern Europe before 1989, will not fail to admit that the facts and figures I have just mentioned are proof enough we have come to inhabit a miracle. Normality as a miracle - this is another specific feature of the “psychology of transition” along with normality achieved by leaps and bounds. However, one may not speak of 'normalization' as long as one relates to it as if it were a miracle. And we should also admit that, in the roughly four years since 'New Europe College' was established, we have achieved more than we have hoped for when we first started off. The feeling something miraculous was going on has been replaced by the sound routine of something which goes without saying. The first grantees - of which some were no longer in the prime of their lives and had therefore been affected by totalitarian indigence for much longer, enjoyed the good working conditions we were offering with great enthusiasm. The younger generations accept them quite naturally, without excessive sentimentalism. In the beginning we were a little bit hurt by such civilized 'coolness', by such functional calmness. We judged them as symptoms of an untimely world-weariness, as 'post-modern' cynicism. Soon we came to realize that

what stroke us as the marks of a 'thermal death of enthusiasm' were, however paradoxical, the very signs of success. Within four short years what was once a miracle had turned for sixty Romanian scholars into daily routine. In other words New Europe College has become a center of irradiation of naturalness, a space which 'produces' normality. This is perhaps the most telling quality and the best definition of a 'center of excellence'. Excellence is the normal state of the spirit. After all normality is closely related to 'norm', that is to say to law, a principle of exigency. It is precisely such a principle of exigency that the 'New Europe' prize has made possible for its recipients. The effort to build around this exigency has been, to us all, an inspiring challenge and a labor-intensive enjoyment.

We would be only too happy to start it all anew.