

New Old Europe*

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In February 1992 when I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg as a freshly adopted member, Wolf Lepenies introduced me to the other Fellows as "a former Minister of Culture who would occupy himself with angels during his stay in Berlin". Naturally, such a combination could only provoke perplexity. Neither the fact that I had been a Minister, nor the way I looked encouraged instant association with angelology. It took a full two months to attenuate the involuntary "exoticism" of my first appearance and to recover, in the eyes of my colleagues, the status of "normality...". A surrealistic note continues to linger around my stay in Berlin. To be awarded — after six months of angelology — a prize that is called "New Europe" is, you will admit, rather unusual.

Of course, the Prize is for me a very happy occasion. It is a responsible happiness because it is not simply an honor conferred on an individual, but support offered for the birth of an institution. "New Europe" will soon become, I hope, the name of a center for transdisciplinary studies in Bucharest. The organizing of this center faces and will go on facing a number of difficulties, some of them technical, others more subtle, depending on the context in Eastern Europe and on a certain crisis of mentalities. Even the words "New Europe" will be a problem. For those who have lived for decades under the fire of communist propaganda, the word "new" is a compromised word. We have been brought up with the idea of the fatal contrast between "old" and "new", with the implication that everything old is bad and everything new is good. As a reaction, we have become suspicious of a "novelty" that proved to be more and more evanescent and authoritative. "New" became the substance of all demagogues, the disturbing name for all the destructive changes with which we were confronted. Our parents were arrested in the name of "novelty", access to the landmarks of our intellectual tradition was forbidden in the name of novelty, our houses were demolished and the villages were "systematized" in the name of novelty. Above all, a new pedagogical model arose spectrally, achieving a particularly brutal reality in spite of its schematism: I mean the new man, a mixture of utopia and decerebrated obedience. This type of man rapidly invented a language of his own: a disfigured, inanimate language suffocated by the void of ready-made formulas and slogans. The English, following Orwell, call this new kind of language (analyzed by Françoise Thorn in a famous book as "langue de bois") "newspeak". This novelty, once it was set up, was an equivalent for fake, for jeering at the past, for a decrease in genuineness. You will understand that, with such a background, everything that was imposed as "new", even if it came from "normal" parts of the world, could seem suspicious. We got tired, and still do, of seeing so many things decorated with the designation "new": the "New Wave" in French philosophy, the "new international economic order", the "new right", religiosity of the "new age" type, etc. Ubiquitous and enjoying a legitimacy that is never questioned, "novelty" seems to have become a superstition. The feeling of vanity ("there's nothing new under the sun...") seems to be obsolete.

And now we have the concept of a "New Europe". For us, in Eastern Europe, European "integration" is not felt as acquiring a new status, but recovering an old one. And Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall is the old one. It was the Europe after 1945 that was "new" and provisional. After half a century it cannot, of course, be reborn as a replica of its own former self. The spirit of the time is different: the context is modified, the perspectives are calculated in terms of a different line on the horizon. We can ask ourselves, however, what is the optimal dosage of novelty that a given reality can bear in order to remain itself? How new can Europe allow itself to be, so as not to become something completely different? And, further still, *what precisely* should remain unchanged in the

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social, political and cultural structure of Europe, for Europe to remain what we all know it to be?

These are, in my opinion, the questions which the countries in the Eastern part of the continent are prepared to answer: more prepared, perhaps, than the Western countries, marked as they are by relentless development, without "feedback", without complexes. We in the East preserved, with a desperate piety, an image of Europe which today no longer seems to have a real counterpart. When someone in Prague, Budapest or Bucharest says "Europe", he does not have the same thing in mind as someone who would say it in Berlin or Paris: a sort of "merry, old Europe" very different, in spirit, from the "new Europe". The more we have, in fact, been isolated from the heart of the continent, the more "pure" was the image that we faithfully kept in our minds. We are Europe's past, with what was noble in it (and, as such, worth treasuring) but also with its burden, its inertia and its prejudices. In Eastern Europe the good conscience of Europe is mixed with its guilty conscience: memory mixes imperceptibly with decrepitude. In other words, we are to the same extent the depositaries of a possibly rejuvenating potion and of a dangerous toxin.

In a certain sense, the Institute that I wish to open in Bucharest with the support of my friends here intends to turn to good account the potion and to transubstantiate the toxin characteristic of the East European environment. This is not the moment to go into details. I shall only briefly talk about the principle: there are, in Rumania, as in other former communist countries, considerable intellectual energies which existed marginally until 1989 for political reasons, and which now exist marginally for economic reasons. Lacking modern research equipment, periodicals and permanent contact with Western scientific circles, the only hope for these people is the chance of a scholarship abroad, after which, if they want to survive professionally and if circumstances prove favorable, they decide not to return. To offer these scholars an environment in which they can work, even for only one year, under conditions similar to those in the West is, I think, a first step towards stopping the brain drain that not only weakens poor countries, but can also no longer be absorbed by the richer ones. Such an Institute would provide a vitamin shot for the worn-out tissue of the delayed Europe of the East. At the same time it would mean reintroducing into the circuit of the new Europe a type of research that relies more on its good *old* habits, on what should be a *permanence*. A type of intellectual survived in the East who has not been encouraged, on the whole, in the West. It is the *non-profit intellectual*, who does his work *gratuitously*. He does not delimit his vocation according to the priorities of the moment, he does not regulate his efforts under the pressure of fixed appointment schedules and he does not formulate his questions so that they guarantee generous sponsorship. Under the hallucinatory influence of uncircumstantial problems, freed from the obsession of being competitive and from the mechanical rhythm of competition, this kind of researcher does not integrate easily into institutional life. He is his own institution. In his negative variant, he loses himself in brilliant oratorical performances and risks becoming a picturesque failure. But if he succeeds, his success is the success of free investigation, of the unconventional approach, of the *imprevisible*. The intellectual I have in mind does not have any inhibitions about the borders between disciplines; since he has learned to survive without official support, he does not feel responsible before external instances; he feels justified by his endowments and his efficiency and does not have to account for his "originality"; he is an economist, but he is interested in Husserl and Wittgenstein; he is a classical scholar but also studies market-economy in post-communist countries; he is a physicist intensely concerned with mystical literature. He has one criterion and one motive only: *curiosity*, the *curiositas* that Cicero considered to be the source of disinterested knowledge: *nulla utilitate obiecta*. The European destiny of "curiosity" is quite intricate: Christianity has ended by condemning the excesses of curiosity, curiosity as a *vice*, *cupiditas noscendi* which undermines the foundation of faith together with *superbia* and *concupiscentia*. Curiosity may be indiscretion and blasphemy. And yet, the free exercise of curiosity — with all its risks — is the axis of the Greek spirit (Seneca invoked curiosity as a *Graecus morbus*) and Europe, the old and the new, would be unthinkable without the "Urphänomen" of Greece. Today's scholar runs the risk of being learned without being curious any more. The Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Princeton, Stanford, NHC, NIAS, and SCASSS have the merit to be models of recovered curiosity. And the research center in Bucharest would like to follow these models, giving a chance to the intellectuals in Eastern Europe for whom curiosity has not

lost a certain innocence.

A *new Europe*, through which the prestige of *old and eternal Europe* can be seen in transience, is a project that deserves some thought. A new Europe, whose attitude towards itself would be like that of Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* towards history: he advances at dizzying speed towards the future but flying backwards so that his eyes embrace and retrieve, all the time, the whole past of mankind; a past that is always and wholly *present*, a seminal past, the only vital substance of any renewal.