

*Civis Romanus sum * & I am a European Citizen*

Dear Citizens of Europe,

Before writing to you about *the profile of our first European President*, I have to ask you a favour. Read this letter from the beginning till the end: don't look for the name I am going to mention: the chance you recognize the name equals the chance of winning the first prize in your national lottery. Your motives to read this letter are, I hope, my arguments: they count more than names.

My starting point is the thesis that Europe's welfare, well-being, security and attraction for non-Europeans, are the outcome of two strategies: the mastering of our past and, as a psychological result, the belief in the rebirth of Europe. How? By extending the practice of our democratic values; by becoming staunch defenders of justice and international law; by integrating Islam in our religious traditions; by realizing the shift of power to the East and, therefore but not only, by facing the power of other cultures with open eyes. In a nutshell: by turning the back to our violent past, in order to walk to a future that will be different, even very different of the last century.

The President of the EU must visibly and audibly embody the endeavour of mastering our past, while explaining the historical uniqueness of the adventure by the name *Europe*.

Second point: the coming president is not elected by the citizens in our 27 countries... therefore, his authority is not legitimized by us, citizens of the EU. This democratic failure leaves the coming president with only one option: she or he has to win our hearts and minds by understanding the many scars we carry on our skin, and if not on our skin, at least in our minds and hearts. She or he has to understand the roots of our culture, from the times of the Greeks, the Romans and the Barbarians, all together our ancestors, until the fascist and communist dictatorships of the 20th century. She or he has to speak to us about the history of our religions and our secularism. She or he has to understand that globalization may be a fact but that this fact is no justification for wild capitalism.

I wish that the first president of the EU is able and willing to speak to us about the borders of Europe, not primarily its geographic borders but the borders of its values, and of its historic responsibilities. For example by talking about Turkey, being a part of our history and culture since the Greek populated its shores and our crusaders destroyed Greek Byzantines Constantinople in 1204, or since the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923) controlled much of South Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. I wonder why in 2008 so many of us are still afraid of Turkey, since 1952 a loyal member of NATO. Is it perhaps Islam, we are afraid of? But also Islam is part of our history since the 8th and 9th centuries. Until recently, we have been the colonizers of North Africa; the Middle East; India, Pakistan and Indonesia... we were the masters in so many Islam countries, and now we are afraid of them?

I wish that the first president of the EU is able and willing to speak to us about our responsibility for the state of Israel, because Palestine was under British rule, before it became the state of Israel on May 14, 1948. We were present at the cradle of Israel, and therefore co-responsible for the lack of rights of the Palestinians; for the lack of our values in the Middle East, the most dangerous region in the world... a permanent threat of an all-out war. Why this threat? Because of our need for oil; because of our shame for our holocaust.

I do realize that I am asking a lot of our first president, when I wish that she or he understands our fears and hopes, and is able to speak to us in a way that heals the wounds of our distant

and recent past: *Europeans killing Europeans by the millions*, not to speak about our victims in the other continents. Because, let never forget that Europe, the back garden of Asia, discovered continents, conquered them, and lost them through its own stupidity. We were too greedy; too violent and above all, undemocratic. Our values were not their values, because we didn't practice our values outside the national borders; often not even within the national borders.

I do realize that I am asking a lot of our first president, when I want her or him to explain to us, why countless intellectuals from all over Europe developed the ideas and defended the values that lead us into the wars of 1914 until today. Why today? Because the wars of our past are continuing in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

However, I am sure that a president who is a good story teller; who is compassionate, intelligent and altruistic by heart, that such a president will be able to show to us, citizens of Eastern, Central and Western Europe, that we share a common past. And that we, citizens of the EU, sharing experiences and basic values, are able to create a future without the violence of the past, transforming the EU into a beacon of peace and welfare, while not turning our back to the world that we conquered and lost, but might regain in freedom, due to our democratic lifestyle, imagination in art & science, and our technological innovations.

My conclusion: we need a president with both a classic and romantic mind who can lead the European council of the 27 heads of state, by weaving the threads of our ancient histories into a common pattern that shows the richness and values of one of the greatest civilizations on earth, notwithstanding its bloody past.

My choice: dr. Andrei Plesu, 1948, Bucharest, Rumania...philosopher, historian of art and religion; Rector of the *New Europe College*, Institute of Advanced Study in Bucharest

Listen to him, while you are reading out loud the quotations below...do taste the style; the clarity; the complexity; the simplicity, and yet the profundity of his thoughts. After the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, he became minister of culture (1990-1991) and minister of foreign affairs (1997-1999). He can preside the 27 heads of state, because he is and is not one of them. That's his secret and the secret of my choice.

The quotations are part of his lecture about *humanism toward the third millennium*.

With high esteem to you all, European citizens

Fons Elders

Huize Piranesi, Warder, The Netherlands
May 1, 2008
www.fonselders.eu

* I am a Roman citizen

Andrei Plesu

The Splendours and Misery of Humanism

“I come from Rumania, a country where, during forty-five years of communist dictatorship, words were as damaged as people....

The alteration of language was not only a secondary effect of a generalized crisis, but the essential instrument of a strategy that intended the alteration of man. *Newspeak*, or as they called it, the *wooden language*, became the spiritual environment of the new man...

In this respect there is a radical difference between communism and fascism. Fascism has also compromised words, but it has compromised words that have within them, from the very beginning, something suspect – or at least ambiguous. Terms like race, nationality, power and so on, should always be carefully analyzed in order to separate that which is acceptable in them from that which can become dangerous through manipulation. But “humanism”, or “fight for peace”- who is disposed to ask himself questions about their dangers? What evil can there be in the idea of progress?

Fascism, sometimes out of cynism, sometimes out of a barbaric imbecility, showed a certain consequence between expression and action. If it wanted war, it made the apology of war. If it was anti-Semitic, it theorized anti-Semitism. Communism, on the contrary, coupled a vicious behaviour with a rhetoric of virtue. It was always ready for war, but constantly spoke of peace. It was always anti-Semitic, but constantly spoke of humanism. It practiced privileges, lies and injustice, but constantly spoke exhaustively about social equity, truth and justice. This doesn't make fascism more innocent than communism. What I want to say is that there is a certain differentiation, an imaginative force of evil which is its very vitality. There is a specific evil of fascism and a specific evil of communism.

The question arises whether there is an equivalent imagination of good. I wonder if our spontaneous adherence to the values of humanism doesn't sin sometimes through lack of imagination. Is there no risk of falling asleep in the splendour of humanist discourse and being unprepared, disarmed for its latent misery?

I should quickly review the splendour of humanism. We all know it. We have been brought up with it, worshipping it. We are accustomed to think according to its criteria. From renaissance humanism to modern new humanisms, from the Italian model of humanism to the German one, European history is scattered with the fruit of this attitude of the spirit for which Greek/ Latin classicism, the scholarly opening towards the world, the dignity of the individual and his trust in the capacity of human knowledge to make us better and guarantee a harmonious ascending evolution, are essential values. If, after the fall of Christian unity of Europe, the new axiological system of humanism had not started to function, the world of today could not have been born or it would have been born as an invertebrate world with no consistency and bearing.

Every cultural achievement of the last five centuries is due, one way or another, to the spiritual atmosphere of humanism. Humanism has become the fundamental pedagogy of the modern world and in its widest sense, the foundation of its social performances. Humanism (become humanitarianism) is the current motivation of civil engagement, of philanthropic acts, of altruism of all kinds. Briefly, a sort of secularized Christianity, a moral justification suited to the enlightened rationalism of modernity. Can such a noble term go through a crisis? Let us start by saying that any humanism has as much value and as much valuability as has the definition it gives to man himself.

Here the first miseries begin to raise their heads. Humanism operates at times with a rather statistical concept of man. In order to be more comprehensive, it tends to put humanity at a

minimum of its real dimension and ends by seeing in man less than what he really is. To be human becomes, unwillingly, the equivalent of being weak. A quite disputable sentimentalism changes love for humanity into a cloying tutorship which seems to relate to man as if to a disabled being. To be human is, in this case, to be *only* human, and consequently to need a privileged treatment where paternalism mixes with an extreme tolerance and the kind of compassion owed to an eternal victim. This sentimentalism ...devitalizes the vertical energy of humanity...

Humanism should not only protectively look after people. It is also a beneficial challenge to the human condition, a virile exigency starting from the conviction that man is not only a *limit*, but also a *project*. A world of humanism must be something different from a perfectly articulated social system that has in view the mere sheltering of a disabled humanity. A world of humanism is a world that optimally administrates human performance. Such a world must, of course, never be merciless and never make use of man....

On the other hand and symmetrically opposed, there is also another type of excess: the humanism that idolatrizes man, that sees in him more than is fitting. From the sentimentalism of poor man, we face here the delirium of the superman; in other words, a triumphant, exalted humanism, as unrealistic and damaging as the one mentioned above. Man as an object of worship is the theme of this kind of humanism, for which we find famous quotations from Sophocles: (There is no greater wonder than man”), to Nietzsche, and which transforms the whole universe into prime matter of an inverted mystique. Not a mystique of the creator, but an over-dimensioned and usurping creature.

There are two connotations of this abuse: *the distortion of the cosmic feeling* and *the fading away of the feeling for transcendence*. Humanism as brutal anthropocentrism ends up by no longer being aware of the world order, of the correct proportion between its components. Instead of consecrating all other realms by means of his light, man subjects them with a gesture of totalitarian authority. He becomes a consumer of the world instead of being its *ratio*. Man does not succeed in defining his value other than by overshadowing the values that are distinct from him. Represented by this species of humanism as a hero in perpetual expansion, mastering elements, dominating nature as a demiurge, as a god, man becomes the emblem of an irresponsible egoism, the grandiloquent schema of a utopia. He comes to perceive himself as his own transcendence. We find ourselves within the sphere of a humanism that transforms man into an opaque screen placed between the world and God. This humanism is the humanism of the lonely man, torn away from the metaphysical texture of the universe. But we know from the first pages of Genesis that it is not good that man should be alone, no matter how strong he feels. True humanism intensifies the solidarity of man with *natura naturata* and his dependence on *natura naturans*; it is neither the humanism of a diminished man, nor of the idealized man monumentally projected against an empty sky. Pendulating between such dangers, searching for himself within the interval between them, man should not rush into defining himself irrevocably. And neither should humanism. In fact we lived without this word until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The similar earlier terms did not have the meaning of the term today. Humanism in its widest sense, is nothing else than the natural irradiation of human nature. It is the trace left in the world by the presence of *homo humanus*. Humanism is the fragrance, the smell of humanity, and if we become too analytical concerning fragrances, we fall into ideology and administration. Thank-you.”

Conclusion

One more quote of Plesu during the lively discussions between the participants: “If Europe will not make an effort to be open to the specificity of other models, there is the danger of

seeing Europe die in a sort of quiet, irresponsible, smiling welfare. This is a point I wanted to make, and I am sure if Europe does not do her best to face this new world pluralism, a great danger is confronting her.”

HUMANISM TOWARD THE THIRD MILLENNIUM, Fons Elders (ed.) VUBPress Brussels 1993, 67-71, 90
Forum 2001 Symposium with Mohammed Arkoun. DuoDuo, Fons Elders, Franco Ferrucci, Grazia Marchianò, Andrei Plesu, Mogobe Ramose, Rob Tielman