Thinking the European Identity [1999]

ETF, 1. 2. 99

We need a certain conceptual equipment, and so I shall start with some clarifications of terms I shall use in he following development of my ideas. Then, I shall reduce myself briefly to one single point, namely to an interesting idea or tradition of conceiving the problem of Truth

difference A): European unity (or integrity) x European identity; outward x inward aspect (negotiating, planning, organizing x forming, constituting as a basis)

1. difference B): logical identity (posession od a certain abstract quality) x actual identity (result of a concrete active identification)

2. the problem of the European identity is a historical one, not a logical one; Europe is a historical phenomenon, a historical event – any event is characterized by having its beginnning, its process of development and its ending

3. we understand far better the identity of any living being (than of a historical event), because any event of a particular life history of a plant or of an animal seems to be integrated in itself, without our contribution, independently of us; in the case of a historical event, every understanding of it is at the same time co-constituting it

4. an important consequence of our our active (and perhaps even conceptual) intervening into the constitution of any historical event is our necessary engagement in living history: we are at the same time not only part of the history, „historical objects“, but also acters of history, „historical subjects“

5. the very eesential character of a historical subject is its possible transgression and even transcendence of the factual historical process, and it means the transgression and transcendence of the objectivity of his own: no subject of any activity can be reduced to itself (nor to himself, if you mean a human beeing)

6. any transcendence is oriented somewhere „out“ of itself, to something different and „outside“ of it (we must not understand this „out“ in space terms); we use to speak about this orientation as about „intention“ (it must not be reduced to a psychical phenomenon only): any active intentional relation is oriented to something outside of it

7. now, we can finally start with our thinking over the European identity: it is not „given“, but based on selected past as well as on proposed and prepared future

8. to prepare and fulfill plans and projects for future presupposes to select and accept basic trends and materials from the past – the so called „tradition“

9. All profound European traditions are built on two (or three) main ancient cultural traditions, the Greek one, the Hebrew one (and perhaps on the Rome or Latin one, too). For both (or all) of this two (or three) main old traditions the Christianity an especially important historical medium was represented by the Christianity (a certain time, also Islam was important, especially for introducing Aristotle´s philosophical works to medieval Europe). Rome was important for its perfectly elaborated system of law.

10. One of the basic new qualities of thinking elaborated in old Greece is its conceptual structure. Without concepts and their logical nets no precise thinking would be possible, i. e. no philosophy and no scientific disciplines. But the Greek conceptuality was narrowly connected with a predominant „metaphysical“ orientation to unchangeable entities, a consequence of a fatal undervaluation of or sometimes even disregard for time.

11. So this tradition of the Greek conceptuality is unable to open for us a more precise view of the European identity, the nature of which is – as we stated already – of a far more than two thousands of years till now lasting historical event.

12. The art and way of historical thinking (or better: of thinking history) is based on a different approach we adopted from the other main ancient tradition, namely the jewish one. The Greek „historians“ were able to write chronicles only, but they had only small understanding for real (or better: true) history, i. e. for the „meaning of history“.

13. Any interpretation of the „meaning“ of a historical event or a historical development has to be oriented not only to the so called „given facts“, but also to different aims and goals of the people, and not only to those ones which gained but also which failed or remained unfulfilled till the actually present time. To understand history means to understand not only the given factual aspects, but also the possible different outcomes of different human activities in the past as well as the different interpretations of the following generations and epochs.

14. Especially important are the so called „infinite goals“ which transcend every particular result of human activities (the term of Hermann Broch). Such infinite goals must not be thought of as any given entities, facts, objective values etc. , but as non-objective but highly relevant appeals to men, to human beings, to all of us personally.

15. The influence of the ancient hebrew tradition provoked a certain important change in the way of our speaking about truth, which was originally founded on the old Greek tradition. The Greeks understood the truth as being in accordance with what is. The way how the use of term „truth“ changed is really significant. In theory, the Greek conception of adaequation or correspondence or similarity of our thoughts (or sentences etc.) to the things being overlives, but in common speach we ask everytimes: what is the true aim of human life? what is the true meaning of our situation? And even: who is the true God? What is the true justice, the true righteousness? The true knowledge? The true love?

16. This conception of Truth as the highest instance at all was once formulated by Baruch Spinoza, really against his own philosophy and against the whole cartesianisme: Veritas est index sui et falsi. We can understand it as a part of his jewish heritage, really incompatible not only with cartesianism, but with the whole Greek and then the common European tradition.

17. In the 3rd and 4th chapter of the Third Ezra (the 1st apocryphic Ezra) we find a nice history about solving a riddle given by the Persian ruler to his peaple. On the end of the history we find a formulation „the God of Truth“, not the Truth of God, because the Truth is victorious over all, according the latin translation: super omnia vincit veritas. Several years after Jan Hus, who in the XV. Century made this idea of the victorious Truth well known in our country, was finally executed in Constance, an English philosopher, theologian and diplomat, Peter Payne, who came to the Czech kingdom and became one of the prominent diplomats of the Hussite movement, provoked the Hungarian king Zikmund (in Bratislava) in his speach in many directions, and also theologically by stating that through Jacob the Truth gained over the God himself. I understand this idea as trying to express that in the light of the Truth it can only be clear which one out of various gods is the true God. This special non-Greek tradition of understanding the Truth came in our ending century to special interpretations in the works of two philosophers and one theologian, all three of them disciples of Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, professor of philosophy and sociology at the Charles University and finally the first president of the Czechoslovak Republik, founded after the first world war, namely Emanuel Rádl, Jan Blahoslav Kozák and Josef Lukl Hromádka.

18. This conception of Truth as the highest instance of all which is important in human life, but which can be and really is in nobodie´s property, seems to me to be one of the orientation points for our thinking about the future of Europe as well as about its identity. No conception of Europe and of its identity should be accepted which could not be adopted by non-Europeans. So the idea of the Truth which is superior over all things and prevalent over all values and victorious over all powers and kingdoms etc. in this world, and which is no European property, but a final goal of the life and thought of every true European human beeing, is able to bring not only Europe to its identity, but

also all other living cultural traditions in this world together and at the same time to their own identity.

19. I hope that the European identity cannot be organized politically, economically, financially etc. only, but principially and before all by understanding our main goals in our privat as well as in social life. I know very well that there exists only little understanding for such a vision. In any case, Europe was never a political unity. We have to ask if such a unification or integration can be fulfilled without loosing the essence of Europe. Perhaps yes, but only if we shall understand and behold such universal ideas as well as our openness to all other inhabitants of our planet.