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EUROPEAN SELF-AWARENESS AND THE SPECTRE OF THE BALKANS *

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“A spectre is haunting Europe: the spectre of communism” – so proclaimed Karl Marx in 1847. This quotation is not introduced with any sarcastic intent. I certainly should not dare to claim, as some have, that the spectre of communism no longer haunts Europe. For the metaphor of the spectre is not meant to evoke only a threatening future, but also a past that still looms over us; a past which bears heavily upon the present, as the dead return to torment the living. Indeed, in these last years of a century of unprecedented bloodletting, innumerable are the dead who continue to torment the living.

But another spectre that has haunted Europe since the last century is that of nationalism. The concept of the nation-state, founded on a mythical view of history and on a mass patriotism that has nothing to do with attachment to the native soil, is no more venerable than European self-awareness. It developed in the nineteenth century, bringing nothing really new to European culture, but paving the way for the great catastrophes of the twentieth century by creating the preconditions for the First World War¹. This war was not only the first of worldwide scope, but also marked the end of relatively limited confrontations between professional warriors, and the beginning of the era of total warfare involving entire populations². Many commentators therefore cannot help but associate this spectre of lethal nationalism with the idea of a Balkan powderkeg, with all that this expression suggests of uncontrolled passions. Reacting to a certain episode of the siege of Sarajevo, Jim Hoagland, a columnist of the Washington Post, wrote “Primary blame does lie with the... stupid acts of the warring tribes of ex-Yugoslavia...”. And he added “Outsiders cannot be blamed for not risking their own lives to make these tribes stop killing each other”

* *Slightly revised version of a lecture given in French in Sofia, during the opening session of a symposium on “The Balkans and Europe in the face of new challenges”, organized jointly by the “Association Internationale des Sociologues de Langue Française” (AISLF), the “Association Bulgare des Chercheurs Francophones en Sciences Sociales”, the “Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Sofia” (3–6 March 1994). Translated from French by L. and J. Cheney (Villeurbanne, France).*

1 I take my inspiration here from the work of Denis de Rougemont. See D. de Rougemont, 1970, on this subject.

2 This was noted in particular by Raymond Aron (1962; 1992).

(Hoagland 1994). The repeated use of the word “tribe” is clearly indicative of a perception of complete irrationality. It is upon this basis that many Europeans view the Balkans as a region that is no longer truly European, but a foreign body in the sense of being foreign to the awareness that Europe has of itself.

But what Europe are we talking about, and what European awareness? Indeed, can we legitimately talk about Europe as a single entity, as was recently questioned by Jacques Attali (1994)? At different periods, the structure of reference has been the Roman Empire, the Carolingian Empire or Christendom. In the eyes of Paul Valéry (1925), those who could be considered Europeans were those peoples who, during the course of their history, had been subjected to the three decisive influences of Greek philosophy, the Roman Empire and Christianity. It has been stated that Europe is just a little peninsula attached to Asia, but it has always tended to be the most westerly parts of this Asian peninsula that have appeared in the eyes of its inhabitants, of its intellectuals and even of its historians as the most genuinely European (Braudel 1987; Duby 1973); this region where freedoms were gradually acquired one by one to finally reach the condition of modernity. In contrast to this “old Europe”, which is the more or less legitimate heir of the western Roman Empire, and where Christianity according to the latin rite spread, that other Europe, situated to the east and south-east of what were the central empires, has always seemed like a marginal Europe, of rather uncertain status. The “old Europe” – the one that has prospered at a safe distance from the threats of Asia – has mixed feelings, to say the least, towards these eastern and south-eastern extremities. When thinking of the Balkan peninsula, one must not forget that Islam was for centuries competing here with christian Europe; Turkish armies camped several times at the gates of Vienna and only the support of the Poles under Jan Sobieski allowed the threat hanging over the city to be finally removed. It is well known that the Balkans formed the glacis from which the Ottoman Empire was obliged to withdraw step by step. Enlightened European opinion of the nineteenth century took the side of the peoples struggling for liberty, and the Bulgars, Greeks and Romanians shared the sympathy lavished on the Poles by the liberals of the period. On the other hand, it is clear that politicians gave short shrift to the aspirations of the subjugated peoples when their national interests were at stake. Above all, one must remember that, through the involvement of the European powers anxious to resolve what was then called the eastern question, the Balkan wars of the beginning of this century became the prelude to the First World War.

Indeed, on the eve of the Great War, the eastern question had continually reared its head for over a century. At the time of the crisis of 1840, triggered by the conflict between Sultan Mahmoud and his vassal Mehmet Ali, Pasha of

Egypt, Alexis de Tocqueville, then a deputy under Louis-Philippe, described the complexity of the situation to the French parliament³. Russia was interested in diminishing the strength of the Turkish Empire. England, in contrast, could only desire its maintenance, in the hope of preventing the Russians from gaining control of the Dardanelles and of weakening Mehmet Ali so as to reinforce its own influence in Egypt, a critical staging post on its route to India. France was not anxious to see Russian expansion towards warmer waters, nor an English hegemony over Egypt. With the aim of eliminating France from the picture, England promoted a quadripartite agreement involving Austria and Prussia. Each of the episodes of this dangerous diplomatic game was simultaneously the cause and pretext for intra-European quarrels which could at any time have degenerated into a generalized conflict for which the responsibility would have been shared by all. But rightly or wrongly, the collective memory within Europe retains only the idea that it was the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the return into European history of the subjugated Balkan peoples that allowed regional conflicts – which could perhaps have remained localized – to set in train the process that led to horrors on a scale never previously seen.

Thus we return to the spectre of the nation-state. This romantic concept – one people, one language, one state – contributed to the awakening of subservient populations, and later constituted a powerful antidote to totalitarianism of the Soviet type, but will it now provide once more the basis for a dangerous escalation throughout Europe? In other words, should we consider, as Adam Michnik has ironically suggested, that in this part of the world, nationalism is the ultimate stage of communism? History never repeats itself in precisely the same terms, but the parallel between certain series of events is alarming. At the beginning of this century, the Balkans found themselves at the epicentre of troubles that propagated to the whole of Europe because they happened to lie at the intersection of the spheres of influence of three great multinational empires that were in a state of decline: the Ottoman Empire of course, but also the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires.

Today, we have again been witnessing the collapse of an empire⁴. After the brief euphoria of 1989, and the short-lived dream of a united and peaceful Europe, do we find ourselves reawakening in 1913 (nationalist passions leading to confrontations between various great powers), in 1923 (Greeks and Turks

3 Tocqueville was in favour of a policy of counterbalance, if necessary in the form of a French presence in the region (*Oeuvres complètes*, III, 2; see also Jardin 1984).

4 I mentioned “the first signs of the disintegration of the totalitarian eastern empire” in August 1988, during the opening session of the XIIIth congress of the *Association Internationale des Sociologues de Langue Française*, receiving a sceptical or even reprobatory reaction from some of my colleagues in Geneva (1989, p. 6).

organizing massive movements of populations) or in 1933 (demagogues belittling the efforts of the League of Nations)? Or are we rather witnesses of a new situation which combines the confrontations of the beginning of the century with the kind of political manipulations seen in the thirties, the logic of annihilation inherited from the Second World War and the most modern technical capabilities? Perhaps it is this unfamiliar combination of regrettably familiar ingredients that unsettles our judgement. As regards in particular the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, our perplexity is clear to see, even in the diagnosis of the basic situation. For example, until quite recently⁵, the influential French newspaper *Le Monde* reported these events in a section modestly entitled “the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia” (*les conflits de l'ex-Yougoslavie*); at the same time, the Russian press used the more brutal title *Balkanskaya Voyna* (the Balkan War)⁶. The Balkan War – that nightmare that the West wished would go away and which it was so anxious not to have to relive.

In these circumstances, how does the geopolitical situation in the region appear to an external observer as we approach the end of the century? After the long exceptional period of two-power politics when areas for armed confrontation could be found only in the Third World, we have returned to a multi-power situation which provides increased scope for instability in the European theatre. Local and regional interests are again resorting to risky strategies that consist of leaning upon the great powers, taking advantage of their divergences and building unstable coalitions. And this is where remembering historical precedents can be instructive but also worrying⁷. I shall limit myself to three examples.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Montenegro, then an episcopal principality, was the scene of a massacre of Muslims. A reaction by the Ottoman Empire was feared, and the Russians were asked for support. The alliance with Russia proved profitable, allowing a series of territorial expansions leading to the independence of a “Greater Montenegro” at the beginning of this century. This state aligned itself alongside Serbia during the First World War.

In 1848, when a liberation movement began to flourish in two Romanian provinces, the Russians sided this time with the Turks to try to bring it to a halt. And when Austria tried a little later to prevent the creation of a “Greater Romania” that might threaten its interests in the region, it was France, under

5 To be precise, until Saturday 5 February 1994, the day when a mortar shell struck a market in Sarajevo, killing 68 people and injuring more than 100 others.

6 See *Izvestia*, *Niezavisimaya Gazieta* and the expatriate paper *Russkaya Mysl*.

7 Recalling the sequence of events that occurred between February 1913 (the festivities of the third centenary of the Romanov dynasty) and 18 July 1914 (the publication of the order for general mobilization in Russia) is quite hallucinating. See especially: Henri Troyat 1991, pp. 289–302.

the Second Empire of Napoleon III, which threw its weight onto the side of the unification of Romania.

In Bulgaria, the extent of Turkish repression of the April 1876 insurrections that would lead in 1878 to the restoration of the Bulgarian state (now celebrated again on 3 March) caused Europe-wide indignation. Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde and many others took up the cause. But two years later, when it became evident that the independent Bulgaria was going to achieve territorial expansion with the support of the Russian Empire, and that this would amount to transferring control over the Dardanelles to Russia, England leapt into action to limit the Russo-Bulgarian ambitions and protect Turkish interests. The resulting Congress of Berlin put back into the melting-pot all that the Treaty of San Stefano had reached.

It is true that the three empires that were confronted in the region have ceased to exist as such, but we should not let ourselves assume that the foreign policies of the states that have succeeded them will not continue to show certain tendencies that were evident in the past.

Russia, which entered a new "time of troubles" almost ten years ago (if we take as point of departure the first moves towards *perestroika*), has shown hesitation between various foreign policy options that are to some extent contradictory. And it appears likely that these hesitations will continue, being based upon internal balances of power that are far from having stabilized. Thus we have a modernist Russia, fascinated by the West, and dreaming of being accepted as a respectable partner on the European and Atlantic stage. This is the Russia that calls for its admission to the "common European house", on the basis of its shared values⁸. This particular aim seems far from achievable at present⁹. We have an imperial Russia, humiliated by its rejection in the *blizhnie zarubezhnye strany* – the adjacent foreign states – which is tempted to pursue a new form of panslavonic movement, if only to give a new sense of dignity and duty to its armed forces. We have a traditional Russia, primarily attached to its spiritual regeneration, and which would be happy to look inward upon itself, so long as it were accepted that Minsk, Kiev and the Crimea would never lie on the other side of the frontier. This is the attitude defended by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his brochure *Kak nam obustroit Rossiю* (How can we reorganize Russia?) (1990). We also have a Russia of Eurasian vocation,

8 This was the policy stated by the Gorbachev-Shevardnadze team before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

9 Although a new generation – albeit a minority – of Russian politicians seems to remain faithful to the idea. See particularly: Anatoly Sobchak who is attached to the idea of the rule of law and universal values, supplanting "class values" (1991).

aware that it is condemned to coexist to the south and east with powerful or potentially threatening neighbours: Islamic countries, China, Japan. Within this perspective, it is the Siberian challenge that becomes all-important, and Europe is only a secondary theatre of operations (Carrère d'Encausse 1992). Finally, we have a Russia in search of an entirely new political and diplomatic synthesis, that will take account of its specific position in today's world, straddling Europe and Asia, two thirds of the way between the developed west and the Third World, attentive of its relations with other countries in similar situations and striving to integrate successfully into the world market: Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, the south-east Asian countries. This particular Russia – *Derzhava v poiskakh sebia*; the power in search of itself (to use the expression of one of President Yeltsin's advisers)¹⁰ – may perhaps astonish the world over the course of the next decade.

But which is the Russia whose troops are now stationed in Bosnia (a fact that might have constituted a *casus belli* at the time of the Cold War)? Is it our loyal partner in the common European house? Is it a brownish-red Russia repainted blue for the occasion? Or is it a Russia which is cunningly trying out a new game of influences? The situation is fraught with uncertainties, and probably will remain so as long as Russia has not overcome the triple crisis of its regime, its economy and decolonization¹¹.

Another entity whose influence hangs over the region is the germanic sphere. Nowadays represented principally by the reunified Germany rather than by the provincial little Austria¹², this zone has always considered itself the bulwark of the West (*das Abendland*) in central and eastern Europe. Ever since the days of the Teutonic Knights, this sense of a mission in the East has recurred persistently, under all manner of ideological guises, sometimes the most sinister. This has produced an enormous area of the continent, stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic, in which germanic influences are inextricably mixed with slavonic ones, in ways that have always defied attempts at creation of ethnically pure states. Whenever this has been tried, the operation has always ended up in a policy of deportations or pogroms.

Turkey, whose potential role in the region cannot be ignored, has ceased to try to be a multinational islamic empire since the revolution of Mustapha

10 Sergei Stankevich. See his 1992 article in *Niezavissimaya Gazieta*.

11 The geographical continuity between Russia and the other entities which made up first the Russian Empire and later the USSR should not lead us to ignore the colonialist relationship that was established between the Russian centre and its periphery (see: Carrère d'Encausse 1990).

12 Despite its awareness of its geographical situation and its historical role in central Europe.

Kemal (Eisenstadt 1994). Quite the reverse, the ethnic homogeneity of a country that has abandoned its imperial ambitions has been defended there with implacable ruthlessness. The political project of Atatürk nevertheless sometimes seems to be put severely to the test. Perceptive observers of the Turkish scene warn us of the rise in this country, as elsewhere around the Mediterranean basin, of a militant Islamic movement, defying the secular character of the regime; a section of Turkish youth senses the shadow of the ayatollahs. In this volatile context, Turkey seems to be split between a European vocation and the wish to renew its role as a regional power. The Black Sea zone of economic cooperation, founded in December 1990 at the initiative of Turkey, offers attractive possibilities for development. But intense Turkish initiatives towards central Asia may just as easily give rise to new confrontations with Russia as provide fresh areas for cooperation. At the moment, relations between these two countries appear to be based on a perception of complementary interests, but in the longer term, the catastrophic scenario of a pan-Islamic movement colliding with a new-style panslavonic grouping cannot be totally excluded (Carrère d'Encausse 1992).

Since the beginning of the century, the United States has repeatedly constituted the last resort of a western Europe under threat. Historically new to the Balkan scene, its entry appears to be awaited as a substitute for European failings. However, this power, divided more than ever between a Wilsonian dream of fair frontiers and the Sonnenfeldt doctrine of spheres of influence, seems to be unfortunately destined to make only ill-timed or belated interventions in the affairs of the region. And its occasional bouts of firmness should not lead us to forget that it was the attitude and declarations of an American secretary of state that encouraged adventurist tendencies in Belgrade.

At a time of nationalist exultation, a factor not to be ignored is the history of the peoples involved, even when the connection may be in part no more than mythical. We have already mentioned the "Greater Montenegro" and "Greater Romania"; the list could be extended much further. Armies are fighting in the name of Greater Serbia, and further away, groups are seeking easy popularity in the name of a Greater Hungary. Perhaps tomorrow, there will be demands for revenge against the Albanian Kossovars who now populate the region for the 1389 defeat of Kosovo. Many states that nowadays seem of secondary importance can boast an epic past which unscrupulous demagogues might be tempted to exploit. Bulgaria, not long ago derisively referred to as the sixteenth republic of the Soviet Union, has an imperial history antedating its Turkish domination. Twice in the past, a Greater Bulgaria stretched out towards the Adriatic and Aegean Seas. Indeed, the present leaders of this country should

be given credit for their prudence and moderation so far, in the face of the Macedonian crisis, in view of its direct implications for them¹³.

In the present, newly explosive juncture, in a region where the mosaic of peoples makes impossible the tracing of borders that cannot be contested, it is hard to see any form of salvation without relinquishing the concept of the ethnically based state. It is time to forsake once and for all the false idea that people speaking the same language and sharing a similar cultural inheritance must necessarily be grouped within the frontiers of a single state. It is also time to see jacobinist centralization and standardization for what they really are: a political concept that has brought disaster to numerous peoples. In fact, there seems to be a need for new institutional arrangements in a number of regions of central and eastern Europe¹⁴: regional autonomy, mixed administration, cross-border cooperation, bilingual administrations, multilingual education, double nationalities, mechanisms for protection of minorities, dual majority systems for legislative matters (majority of the people and majority of regions), a quorum for blocking constitutional changes, military neutralization, etc. All this seems to point towards federalist solutions of the Swiss type (Coenen-Huther 1991). Switzerland – a little country whose founding mythology is built upon the struggle against the Habsburgs – seems in fact to have developed the best formula for multi-cultural coexistence within a single state. One hesitates, nevertheless, to advocate any “Swiss model”, since such a move would seem hardly appropriate in the case of countries at imminent risk of being drawn into a zone of conflict. The history of Switzerland implies a basic strategy of consensual democracy, constitutional guarantees and procedures for compensation for regional imbalances¹⁵. Such mechanisms presuppose a willingness to live together inherited from history and a cooling of passions¹⁶, but they cannot create these conditions. It should also be noted that none of the 22 cantons – that is to say, the 22 little states – which in 1848 accepted substantial transfers of power to a federal authority, constituted a nation-state in the romantic sense of the term. Very much the reverse: these 22 little republics were rooted

13 Not least since the Macedonian problem is not a matter of only ancient history. At the beginning of the Second World War, Boris III had not abandoned the idea of a “Greater Bulgaria” to include lands now located in the ex-Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in Greece (see: Snejdarek and Mazurowa-Chateau 1986, p. 53).

14 Confronted by “demanding cultural minorities” which were unable to make themselves heard before the present political transitions began (see: Janusz Mucha 1993).

15 On this topic, see for example: Yannis Papadopoulos et al. (1994).

16 Objectors will – and already have – pointed to the civil war of the *Sonderbund*. This objection does not hold. This was in fact a low-key conflict of low intensity during which the participants showed every wish to avoid an escalation of hostilities, thus anticipating the negotiations that followed.

in a distant past, in which a common history and common traditions were much more important than language or any real or claimed ethnicity, for the creation and maintenance of a feeling of belonging to a community.

In other words, it is only when one is already convinced that there is no need to speak the same language, to have the same religion or to belong to the same ethnic group, in order to live within a single political entity, that the “Swiss model” – if there really exists such a model – becomes workable. Once these prerequisites are met, but only then, the human spirit will never run short of ingenuity to invent the necessary institutional arrangements. Then it is possible to begin the gradual dismantling of national frontiers by means of transborder cooperation. The geographical continuity of territories then ceases to be a matter of life or death, and the possession of land quite naturally becomes dissociated from questions of national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, however, for the third time in the course of the century, the European dream seems under threat. The first time, it was through blindness in the face of a future that no-one imagined. The second time, it was through cynicism in the face of a future that some imagined only too clearly. This third time, it could be through impotence and confusion in the face of the resurgence of a past that we believed long vanished. At a time when historical symbols are being manipulated so as to bring peoples to massacre each other, one can only try to hold onto the antidote of European patriotism. In the Balkan region, through which passes the line of cleavage between the influences of Rome and Byzantium, the lesson of history and the message of today’s Europe is that nationality can be cultural but that citizenship should be secular, divorced from any real or imagined ethnic basis¹⁷. But in order for this message to be heard, it is first necessary that the concept of citizenship should have some meaning. In many cases, this implies that there must be fundamental changes in the relationships of individuals with society, with the state and with power.

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17 My Romanian colleague A. Roth has pointed out to me that this idea is related to the concept of a citizenship founded on a constitutional order (*Verfassung*) such as is supported by Ralf Dahrendorf. On this point, I do feel in complete agreement with that author (see especially: Dahrendorf 1992).

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