

Call by Denis de Rougemont for the establishment of a European Cultural Centre


Caption: On 9 May 1948, during the plenary session of the Cultural Committee of the Congress of Europe in The Hague, the Swiss philosopher and critic, Denis de Rougemont, rapporteur for the Committee, emphasises the importance of the cultural dimension of European unification.

Source: ROUGEMONT, Denis de. L'Europe en jeu. Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1948. p. 143-146.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016



<it>For a European centre of culture</it>

[...]

It seems to me that this Congress, judging by the way it has been unfolding so far, is novel in two respects.

First, it has emerged from unofficial initiatives, quite independently of our governments. It speaks on behalf of the people of Europe (nothing like this has ever been seen before), and it intends, on their behalf, to propose something other than a wish-list, something that, for us Europeans, descendants of ancient Rome, has an almost majestic significance. I am referring to institutions.

Secondly, this Congress is different from all the other international endeavours in the following way: it has placed a committee for culture on the same footing as the traditional committees (political and economic). That is also a first.

This simple fact, which you saw for yourself at this morning's plenary session, deserves, I believe, to be particularly highlighted.

It means that those who initiated this Congress felt the need to consider culture as something other than mere decoration, a more or less elegant mask, or the occasion for some polite and pious words; an homage paid by supposedly realistic cynicism to the supposedly insignificant world of ideas.

Those who invited you to this Congress therefore felt the urgency of showing the meaning behind the great hope that they had awakened by launching their appeal for a union. A union for what purpose, and on what basis, and for what benefit that is truly desired by all people? It was the world of ideas and culture that they had in mind, and which is the first answer to the question. It was in an attempt to answer these overwhelming questions that so many of the most prominent men in the cultural life of Europe have agreed for months now, at the expense of their own personal work, to give us their support, their time and, today, their active presence.

If they have done so, it is because they have been thinking something along these lines: We are all overworked, that is clear. We all have our own work to pursue. But can we continue with our work for much longer if Europe is not able to unite? Can this union be created if we do not drop everything else? And do we not have a unique opportunity in The Hague to promote the rights of the world of ideas and to assume, in all humility, our heavy responsibility for the defence of humans and their freedoms?

Allow me to quote to you, from amongst the hundreds of responses provoked by my letter calling upon intellectuals from a dozen European countries to join our committee. The first from T.S. Eliot: I feel that at the present time one ought to do what one can to support a movement of this kind, however desperate the attempt. And the second from the man now chairing our committee, Salvador de Madariaga, I will be happy to devote some time [to the committee], although, I have to say, I am short of it.

Well, is what is miraculous about the world of ideas not precisely that it is able to create, in some magical way, the time that is lacking, the meaning that is lacking, the hope and the vision that our world would lack without it?

Ladies and gentlemen, I know full well that people think that, for the man in the street, the only serious reasons we have for wanting union for Europe are more down-to-earth ones, questions of everyday politics or economic questions that are considered (mistakenly) as purely material ones. Some think that defending a purely European notion of humans, their culture and the meaning that they give to life is of secondary importance and can be left until later.

If, with that sort of materialism (which is as naïve as it is widespread), we claim that the only thing that matters is the economic organisation of the continent, I would answer: then let us be serious in that case and allow ourselves to be colonised as quickly as possible. A man whose spirit I am pleased to say hovers over this Congress, Paul Valéry, foretold of the day when the hidden desire of Europe would be to let itself be governed by a committee of American experts.

On the other hand, if we claim that the only thing that counts is the political order, we are well aware of a certain totalitarian party that is just waiting to impose it in its own way&

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