

Note by Alexandre Marc on the Hague Congress (May 1948)

Caption: In May 1948, describing the issues involved in the Congress of Europe held in The Hague, Alexandre Marc, Director of the Institutional Department of the Union of European Federalists (UEF), drafts a note in which he places particular emphasis on the federalist notions of European unity and outlines the doctrinal differences between the various pro-European movements.

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Europe faces up to its destiny (The Hague, 7 to 10 May)

by Alexandre Marc

The idea of a European federation has ceased to be the private preserve of a few utopians, in whose ranks we were included a few years ago; even a few months ago. Today, our governments themselves, with a delay which can justifiably be regarded as tragic, have taken up the problem of European unity. The famous speech by General Marshall, the meeting of the 16, the Brussels Pact, the French-Italian customs union — all these are achievements whose topicality needs no stressing.

When people who, even before the Year of Grace 1948, discovered the virtues of federalism continue saying today, loud and clear, that they do not trust governments as agents for the federalist transformation of our society, they are accused of being bad-tempered and are suspected of succumbing to the 'I-told-you-so complex'. However, though Spinoza was right to declare that all beings tend to want to prolong their existence, a little thought will make it clear why the 'being' of national governments is, by its very essence, contrary to federalism. Even if we leave aside the many complicated aspects of federalism (which, let me remind you, is an all-encompassing, not just an international, doctrine), we are entitled to wonder whether our governments are really determined to take on the heavy sacrifice which, to their minds, a partial transfer of so-called national sovereignty represents. It would be rash of us to answer 'yes'. As Raymond Silva usefully reminds us, if the untouchable 'nation-state' sovereignty is not dismembered, we are doomed to sink back into the old rut of agreements, treaties and military alliances whose inadequacies and dangers are all too familiar to us.

It looks as though our governments will cross the threshold separating our fragmented and shattered world from a federated world only when they are pushed into it by a whole complex of extra-governmental forces; these are surely the forces that Mr Spaak was appealing to recently when he bravely called out: 'Hustle us!'

Our parliaments, of course, can supply the beginnings of an answer to this urgent appeal: we should not overlook the fact, for example, that motions in favour of European union have been tabled in the House of Commons and the National Assembly, and that they quickly collected large numbers of signatures. It would be a serious miscalculation, even so, to hope, as some do, that we could base all our reforming action on moves by parliaments. To begin with, we must not forget that in most countries the parliamentary machinery is showing unmistakable signs of wear and tear. Secondly, like governments, parliaments hold a part of that famous sovereignty of which we are actually asking them to divest themselves, which makes me think that there might be some point in subjecting them, too, to the vigorous treatment advocated by Mr Spaak.

Taking into account these all-too-brief comments, which lack of space prevents us from expounding in full, the Union of European Federalists drew up and (more especially after its Montreux Congress in August 1947) finalised a plan for 'European mobilisation', of whose broad outlines we should be aware.

The upward revolution of federalism

To mobilise Europe, the federalist ideal, far from being left to governmental wheeler-dealing or parliamentary deliberations, must become a key idea that is firmly rooted in fundamental realities and the aspirations of ordinary people — aspirations and realities which form, broadly speaking, along three lines: economic, political and social, using these terms in their most widely accepted sense.

True to the federalist and, in the pure sense of the word, 'democratic' concept of an upward revolution, the plan for European mobilisation considers that the effort at reorganisation, for which our generation bears the responsibility, must be directed from the bottom up, or it will fail. To put it another way, it must rely on 'cells' which constitute the social organism and, following the three lines mentioned above, traverse all the organs in which these 'cells' coordinate, so that it does not emerge at the supranational level until it has been made fertile, enriched and modelled by all the living forces of our continent.

The federalist edifice can only be built on solid foundations and, so to speak, in organic upward stages

involving local authorities, workshops, family associations and administrative bodies, regions and businesses, trade unions and cooperatives, think tanks and federalist movements proper, universities and churches, and all the groupings through which the diversity and richness of human activity express themselves. These various organisations will have to set up among themselves a ‘hierarchy’ of committees, from action committees at local authority level and works committees to national committees for European federation, with all the intermediate stages: regional, trade union and professional committees, not forgetting parliamentary federalist groups, such as those which already exist in various countries, in between.

Only when this truly federalist-inspired edifice has been raised, from the base to the apex, can we set about solving the difficult problem of the transitional period. Indeed, this architecture, which looks complicated only because it reflects the very complexity of life, will be the only way of moving on to the convening of regular meetings of a genuine constituent assembly.

Ways of designating a constituent assembly

If it is to have the right to act on governments and even ‘hustle them’, a constituent assembly which is to speak on behalf of Europe will have to be more than a meeting of ‘VIPs’, however important they are, a meeting of unelected politicians or even (referring here to a British-inspired plan) of so-called members of parliament, arbitrarily ‘elected’ by mammoth constituencies with no coherence or structure. On the contrary, it must reproduce, as objectively as possible, the ever-moving, complicated balance of forces in Europe; it must validly represent the ‘balance’ between the living functions of society.

In other words, using the federalist networks briefly described above, in each country, under the control of the national committee, a genuinely representative delegation must be elected, so that all the national delegations designated in this way can form, as a body, an Assembly capable of declaring: ‘I am the voice of Europe!’

This is a lofty ambition, of course, and one which is vainly contested by those who think that democracy is synonymous with the law of numbers. Indeed, in the plan being put forward, the ‘members’ forming the constituent assembly are mandated by their peers and not in any way designated by the shapeless masses. The point is that, in the federalist view, it is not just a question of counting votes, but also of weighing them up; the election method being advocated constitutes an attempt — without in any way giving up the legitimate gains already won by what might be called quantitative suffrage — to move on to the level of organised suffrage.

No one would dream of denying that organising suffrage raises delicate, difficult problems. Which organisations will be allowed to take part in the planned elections? What exactly will the practicalities of these elections be? What proportion of the votes will be reserved for each of the organisations regarded as being representative? All these questions, and others, need to be studied carefully and thoroughly, but there is no reason why they should not get answers. There is, of course, no one-size-fits-all solution which, once it has been formulated, could be applied to everything; that kind of simplification would in any case run counter to the flexible, diversified and (in the noblest sense) realistic thinking which lies behind federalism. But there are criteria which can be used to establish a scale of ‘weightings’ which will give the national committees, the delegations and the European assembly itself legitimacy and unquestionable authority.

Those qualities must empower the constituent assembly, on the one hand, to exert effective pressure on governments and, on the other, to work out a draft federal constitution for Europe; also, and most importantly, they must enable it to be itself a foreshadowing of the institutional principles underlying a new political, economic and social order.

We must not, then, lose sight of the fact that, in the federalist view, the ‘Constitution’ cannot be the end product of a discussion in the parliamentary chamber: it must be the final expression of the balance of basic realities, of both spontaneous and deliberately created structures, and of the interaction between them. On that condition, and on that condition alone, will the constituent assembly truly deserve to bear its name.

Coordination of efforts to promote European unity

If it is to work, a project as huge and as ‘revolutionary’ as this needs methodical preparation; a systematic mobilisation of powerful resources. To achieve this, the Union of European Federalists has decided to reject any small-minded approach and seek wholeheartedly common ground with all the organisations, even non-federalist organisations, which propose to work for European union.

As far as we know, there are four such organisations:

- the European Parliamentary Union (President: Georges Bohy, a Socialist Member of the Belgian Parliament; Parliamentary Secretary: Anne-Marie Trinquier, MRP Member of the French Upper House, et al.);
- the Socialist United States of Europe (a movement run by Marceau Pivert, Henri Frenay, John MacNair, Jef Last, et al.);
- the Independent League for European Cooperation (President: Paul van Zeeland, former Prime Minister);
- the United Europe Movement (Chairman of the British Committee: Winston Churchill; Secretaries-General: Duncan Sandys, former minister, and Gordon Lang, Labour MP; Honorary President of the French Council: Édouard Herriot; President: Raoul Dautry; General Representative: René Courtin).

The Union of European Federalists maintains regular relations with all of these organisations. A coordinating committee has been in operation for nearly a year between the UEF and the Socialist United States of Europe. Close links have been set up between the leaders of the UEF and some of the leading lights of the Parliamentary Union. The Independent League and the United Europe Movement, lastly, have associated themselves with the UEF in setting up an International Coordinating Committee responsible for organising the meeting of a first congress to represent Europe.

Within the International Committee, the ‘ideal’ plan that we drafted has been considerably amended. In this connection, I would mention that some people have expressed their surprise at seeing federalists, especially ‘integral’ federalists, working together with people or groups who not only do not profess the same ideas as us but even, on occasion, espouse policies of which convinced federalists cannot approve. It must be understood that, given the ever-faster speed at which events are moving, we have, at least at the outset, to put together the widest possible assemblage of all the forces striving for the achievement of European unity. Whatever the compromises which such an assemblage may momentarily require to be made, in the final analysis, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages — provided, of course, that the federalist movements in the UEF do not give up the features which make them special or surrender their independence, and that they unshakeably oppose any compromises which could expose the very idea of federalism to the mortal danger of being sidetracked for reasons of political expediency.

Be that as it may, the UEF’s delegates have had to reach deals with their partners in the International Committee; I should therefore give a few details of the present state of progress with the overhauled project for which the International Committee assigns responsibility.

Aims of the first Congress of Europe

To our way of thinking, the purposes of the meeting of the first European assembly should be, jointly: putting on a spectacle, deliberating and promoting ideas.

By putting on a spectacle, I mean giving a striking display of the strength and scope of the union, focusing on the European ideal, personalities, trends, groupings, parties and countries which are otherwise opposed.

Deliberating means giving expression to the underlying agreement among Europeans by the official adoption of a number of simple but fundamental principles.

Promoting ideas means sowing the seeds of permanent bodies whose purpose is, firstly, to make sure the Assembly's decisions are disseminated and, as far as possible, put into practice, and, secondly and chiefly, to carry out all the information, preparatory and organisational work set out in the original plan for the Constituent Assembly, in all of the countries concerned.

The attention-catching aspect of this operation should be heightened by involving all parties and all countries, whether from eastern or western Europe; I very much hope that we will be authorised not to insist on linking what we do to events and actions which would divide the world and Europe into closed, hostile entities.

As regards the principles on which Europeans could reach agreement, they could be summarised as follows:

- The transfer by European states of a defined and limited share of their 'sovereignty' to federal bodies endowed with effective powers.
- The promotion of a customs union, moving towards an organised economic union — with due respect for social justice and freedom of initiative for individuals and groups — according to collective needs.
- A guarantee of the rights of Europeans, not only political but also economic and social rights, not only 'passive' rights (i.e. accorded to the individual) but active (i.e. exercised by the individual), a guarantee based not on 'declarations', however solemn, but on economic and political structures, on social institutions and on effective systems of organising supranational control.
- Firm opposition to any form of imperialism, wherever it comes from, action to combat the policy of establishing blocs and to promote the emergence of universalist and, as soon as possible, federalist solutions, with a view to establishing a worldwide system of organisation.
- The emancipation, under the control of a federal body, of overseas territories still under colonialist control, with a view to their liberation and, if possible, their spontaneous involvement in the creative determination to build a united Europe.

Lastly, as regards the promotional aspect of the planned operation, it would deserve a detailed study all to itself; suffice to say here that the main object in view was to make possible the upward revolution, the vital prerequisite for any rebirth of Europe, by a methodical return to the basics, through a determination to stay in contact with the ground, like Antaeus.

How far will the Congress of Europe, due to be held in The Hague on 7 May, prove to be in accordance with the plan that I have just described?

However paradoxical it may appear, at the time of writing these lines it is still impossible to give a clear answer to that question.

The International Coordinating Committee, under pressure from events which are, to say the least, a cause of concern; daunted by the immensity of the task which the good will and dogged hard work of a few people — all too few — cannot possibly carry through on their own; torn between what are, if not opposing, then at least divergent trends; subject to external pressures from the fluctuations in the political forces at play; struggling with material difficulties that you can easily picture — the International Committee, in a comparatively short space of time, has completed a body of work that we are entitled to regard as substantial but which, of course, is not without its faults.

Over the course of several months of extremely hard work, there were various misunderstandings which considerably complicated the already overwhelming task faced by the International Committee. Bearing in mind the responsibilities borne by me, the author of these lines, you will appreciate that, for reasons of discretion, I would prefer not to enlarge on that point. However, as one of the misunderstandings leaked, so

to speak, into the public domain and stirred up a great deal of controversy, it may not be out of place to attempt, one last time, to dispel it.

Winston Churchill, the Chairman of the British Committee for a United Europe, which is represented on the International Committee, having been one of the first — one of the first statesmen, that is! — to come out as a champion of the European cause, his fame and his talent helped to contribute to the impression, in the eyes of many people, that he was the real organiser of the Hague Congress. This impression was mistaken, as the magnificent ‘man with the cigar’ was not a member of the International Committee which alone bears responsibility for the Congress of Europe. But the personality of the former British Prime Minister is so imposing and, to use a fashionable expression, so ‘dynamic’ that the initiatives he takes, even — or especially — his personal initiatives, are difficult to ignore: they succeeded in provoking the ire of the Labour Party.

Some of its leaders, who could only see the Hague Congress as a ‘Churchillian’ enterprise, induced Labour members to decide that their party would not be officially represented at the Congress. The actual effect of the decision seems negligible, since the real organisers of the Hague Congress never planned to invite the political parties to be represented as such.

But the psychological importance of this decision by the Labour Party was soon to prove considerable. Most of the Continental European Socialist parties thought that the members of the Labour Party would not be taking part in the work of the Congress and have therefore seemed inclined to forbid their own members from taking part, out of a spirit of solidarity. In reality, however, Labour is very well represented within the British delegation; it may even be in the majority.

On the very eve of the planned meeting, then, we find ourselves faced with a gross misunderstanding. Not only the International Committee, but also, and in particular, the UEF — whose structure, doctrine and attitudes place it above any suspicion of party politics — are actively exerting themselves to bring an end to this regrettable ambiguity. Let us hope that we contrive to do it at the eleventh hour, at the international socialist conference being held in Paris on 24 and 25 April. As new perils loom before us, is it not our overriding duty to stand united? Have we the right to compromise the cause of European federation, the cause of peace itself, because of a spate of misunderstandings which has as yet involved no fundamental principle?

Europe’s hour has struck

When these lines are published, several hundred delegates will be converging on The Hague.

Whatever the trials and tribulations still to be overcome, one thing is certain: the whole world will have its eyes trained on the first Congress of Europe.

Apart from a major public meeting (in Amsterdam), there are plans for two plenary sessions, at the beginning and the end of our proceedings; the rest of the time, the delegates to the Congress will be working in committees (political, economic and ‘cultural’), where the finishing touches will be put to the major reports, the drafts of which were prepared by international committees, and the texts of the final motions will be drawn up.

It will be up to the delegates themselves to make sure that the Congress is not ‘just any old conference’. Drawing their inspiration from a universally familiar example from history, the federalists hoped to mark the Hague Congress with the stamp of a genuine states-general of Europe. Even if we admit that that hope, for lack of adequate preparation, turns out to be premature and has to be postponed to a later congress on a more solid legal basis, it is still vital for an effort to be made from 7 to 10 May which will make it impossible ever to go backwards.

To achieve that, it is important that the first Congress of Europe, by observing a discipline which it freely accepts, does not fall into the trap of letting itself drown in a flood of pointless speeches, discussions which

lead nowhere and declarations which are never followed up. We must prevent any attempt to turn the Congress into an academic speech-making contest of which the only result could be to paralyse any inclination to take action. What Europe needs, indeed, is action, not speeches.

Nothing would be more pernicious than to let ourselves be swayed by the bogus caution of those who claim that 'the time has not yet come', that 'the solutions have not yet been properly researched', that 'the masses will not follow us'. Yes, the time has come: the European Federation must be established very rapidly — or it never will be! Of course, there are no ready-made solutions, but genuine federalist structures are the only way of finding them. As for the 'masses', what else are they calling for if not union and peace? In fact, it is their leaders who refuse to follow us!

The first Congress of Europe will bear a heavy responsibility, not only before history, but also before the mankind of our day, disoriented and afflicted as it is. The Hague Congress will be judged on how effective it is: how effective in working out and formulating a limited number of simple but efficacious principles, how effective in quickly mobilising public opinion to exercise increasing pressure — which even the more clear-sighted statesmen like Mr Spaak want and call for — on the inertia of governments and bureaucracies; but particularly, let me repeat, how effective in setting in motion, putting to work and promoting authentically and radically federalist organisations, structures, and institutions capable of flushing out the toxins and rejecting the gangrenous parts from our society and encouraging the irresistible growth and flourishing of healthy cells in the liberated body politic.

That is what is really at stake in the 'battle of The Hague'; it is up to us to show that we are worthy of it.