<u>Europe as Will and Imagination</u>

In the face of the processes of unification of Europe and the confrontation with the influence non-European cultures, there appear from time to time questions about European identity. Although a majority of people intuitively apprehend the cultural specificity of our continent, they have, as a rule, some difficulty with precisely defining this identity. The following text sets for itself a quite humble task. Namely, it proposes to work towards such a definition, referring to issues which are generally known to specialists, but of which the larger public is not always cognizant. Because it has a popularizing character, it does not include references to the voluminous literature on the subject.

*

In asking about European identity, we are asking above all about the dominant and specific features of European culture. By the latter, in turn, we commonly mean the set of most widely accepted outlook-shaping and axiological (value-forming) convictions, which find their expression in religion, the law, morality, art, science, and politics. The basic problem is that these convictions have undergone historical and geographical differentiation. This means, among other things, that questions about European identity at once lead to questions about what we mean by "Europe," and from what time we date its origins. When we speak of Europe do we include classical antiquity? Do we include the Middle Ages? Or are we speaking of the modern or indeed only of the contemporary era? Shall we acknowledge, for example, Andalusia under the rule of the Moors as part of

Europe, or not? Shall we abstract from the many geographically determined versions of European culture and try to delineate some trans-regional features, or should we rather try to emphasize the relative distinctiveness of those versions? The issue is thus quite complicated, and every attempt to same something about Europe "in general" will of necessity lead to considerable simplification. If, however, we are to do this we must remember that Europe, taken as a cultural unity, is always the result of a certain construction, of the use of ideal types, to use Max Weber's famous term; that is to say of schematized models which, for research purposes, have been abstracted from a plethora of empirical facts and which concentrate only on those features which in the view of the researcher are the most significant. Every model which goes by the name of "Europe" or "European culture" is, therefore, the result of a certain outlook, a certain design, the result of an emphasis on one thing at the expense of another, and will as a rule express a moral and also a political choice. In this sense I do not believe that there can exist a kind of "Europe in itself," but rather that we have a vision of the Europe that we would like there to be. We need, then, strength both of will and of imagination, in order to specify her identity, and hence the title of this article, an obvious parody of the title of Arthur Schopenhauer's most famous work (*The World as Will and Representation*).

Keeping in mind the full complexity of the problem of "Europe" and the complexity of Europe itself, of the struggle within it of competing tendencies, we may feel inclined to sketch out certain things that we deem typical of European culture. As a basic criterion of this kind of undertaking let us stipulate that we may speak of Europe (or more broadly of "the West") in principle when its inhabitants assume that it exists. Thereby we are taking as the fundamental criterion for the question whether Europe exists, and on what its

distinctiveness depends, the consciousness of its inhabitants. And on this basis we may confess that Europe is a rather unsteady concept. At all times her conceptualization has been largely the concern of the political and intellectual elite, while representatives of the common people at least up to the 19th century considered themselves above all to be "locals," generally having not only no idea of such a place as "Europe," but little sense of any existence beyond the confines of their own village or town. There is no space here to go into the gripping process of the historical evolution of a consciousness of the existence of Europe; it will suffice to say that the ancient Greeks already divided the world into those who spoke Greek and the barbarians (that is, those who spoke gibberish). The same tack was taken by the Romans, who considered to be barbarians all those who were not subjects of the Empire or who did not accept its laws and customs. Typical of the Middle Ages would be the division between Christian and pagan, while in the modern era the basic dichotomy would become between West and East (the so-called Orient). Consciousness of the distinctiveness and specificity of what we *currently* think of as Europe has always intensified in the face of conflict with others. One might say that a notion of Europe-in-itself became one of Europe-for-itself, to use this philosophical expression. And here I would say that the present interest in the question of Europe and its identity results from, among other things, the conviction that we have once again to do with confrontation, struggle and conflict with those who constitute a threat to Europe or who may seem to be threatening to it.

So what does the identity of Europe depend upon? What could be said to characterize it? First of all, we may cite a propensity for self-criticism and self-reflection, an ability to subject to doubt one's own convictions. In this regard one might point out that the quite

specific, dynamic, mutable and internally differentiated tradition of philosophy has always been a kind of laboratory of European thought. No other culture possesses such a philosophical tradition, although this does not mean, of course, that Europe has had a monopoly on philosophical thought. It means only that the philosophy of the West has been from the very outset a field of conflict, disagreement, and debate, the birthplace of new cognitive and axiological models, new ways of seeing the world. It was this tradition that gave European thought a dynamism not found elsewhere, which became one of the tools in the process of European self-education. The work of this philosophical tradition was carried on by science, which has by degrees absorbed it. Religion, and specifically Christianity, has also had an effect on the dynamism of Western culture. Christianity has always been internally varied, and this variety led to reflection on religion and hence to theology, as a reflection on the nature of God, which developed over time. Religious practice, too, in Europe has always been of its own kind, if we consider the core meaning of the Reformation in internally transforming this practice from a "religion of fate" to a "religion of choice," this latter not occurring anywhere outside of European culture. And here it is worth mentioning the specifically European process of the so-called second disenchantment of the world, which was so well described by Max Weber. In rough terms this means the separation from religious principles of social sub-practices such as science, the law, economics, and art, and their re-orientation towards their own regulatory values (for example, economics – efficiency and profit; science – truth; the law – normative fairness; art – originality and authenticity).

This already-mentioned dynamism was transferred from philosophical and religious thought into other spheres, including art and politics. Nowhere has art been so stylistically

4

diverse, nor has politics had such rich philosophical and intellectual resources, as in Europe, or more broadly speaking in the West. (Let us recall that the West is a more capacious concept than Europe, in which are included regional cultures, such as American culture, that although deeply rooted in a European heritage nonetheless possess their own distinctiveness.) Besides the development of philosophy and theology, another fruitful event for Europe, this time of an institutional nature, was the advent of universities (the first European universities were founded in Bologna and Paris during the 12ᵗʰ century). They became places in which, thanks to the opportunity for debate and criticism, new ideas had a chance to arise, imparting to European culture a character of mutability and diversity. The intellectual innovation of Europe that I have referred to led to the development of a specific European attitude which treated novelty as a value in itself. This phenomenon appeared in the modern era, and in particular during the period of Romanticism. It was then that we can detect the beginning of what historians of culture have called "the tradition [of seeking] that which is new." Romanticism also reinforced European individualism by propagating the cult of the creative genius and a mythology of the unique internal experience of each person, even though – paradoxically – it was also often to advocate *expressis verbis* communal values, which were, moreover, often based on tribal models. Let us add to all the foregoing the birth and development of industry and technology, closely connected with the development of modern science in Europe, and not occurring on such a scale anywhere else in the world. (I say "on such a scale," having in mind above all the dynamism of this growth and its effect on everyday life. Let us note that Chinese culture, for example, boasts numerous discoveries and inventions which clearly preceded similar discoveries and inventions in Europe; however in China, these novelties never became basic dynamizing elements of the structure of everyday life.)

Interest in matters that were different and foreign – in a word, non-European – resulting from an ability to manufacture otherness in itself, and finally, there was the historical rise of the strangest of all economic systems – capitalism (its birth is spoken of as a "European miracle") – and an equally strange political system, democratic liberalism. Add these elements together, and we receive a picture of a civilization which, as a network of mutually connected convictions and practices, is the most *exotic* of all.

What further determined this *Sonderweg* of Europe? In order to answer this we must reach back to the roots of European culture. There exists a broad consensus that these roots are connected with Greek philosophy (and further – with philosophy as such), Roman law, and Christianity. To this I would add the tradition of the Enlightenment, which unquestionably had an influence on European identity during the modern era. We have Greek philosophy to thank for, among other things, the idea of philosophical truth, the conception of theory, the technique of argumentation and scientific debate, the laws of classical logic, and a whole series of ideas on the subjects of cognition and ontology (for example, the differentiation between belief and real knowledge, the Heraclitian dialectic, the atomism of Democritus, and Platonic idealism), and also axiological and political ideas (for example, the Socratic idea of care for the soul, the Platonic conception of the ideal state, and the Aristotelian conception of man as a political animal). To later philosophy we are indebted for many other intellectual discoveries, among which for lack of space we might mention here only a few from the axiological and political spheres: the individual, reason of state, the separation of powers, the social contract, tolerance, the categorical imperative, sovereignty, autonomy, impartial justice, freedom of speech, etc. Here we must also once more mention the Enlightenment tradition, which we have to

thank for, among other things, liberal democracy, the valorization of science and education, individualism, anti-paternalism, the separation of church and state, the conception of a "perpetual peace" between nations, the idea of progress, the beginnings of the recognition of rights of women and children, and indeed, human rights. The second pillar of European culture was Roman law, which introduced a whole range of principles which came to define the European legal tradition. I am thinking now of, for example, ensuring that trials should proceed by due process of law (involving, among other things, the requirement that both sides of a case be heard, and a prohibition on double jeopardy), the principle that every accused person should have the right to a fair trial, the idea of natural law and the separation between natural and institutional law, the beginnings of the idea of a government of laws and of legal defense of private property, the description of contract law, the beginning of a distinction between civil and criminal law, and even international law. The third pillar of European culture (in the order of their historical appearance) is unquestionably Christianity, to which we owe, among other things, the idea of a general brotherhood of man, the moral principle that one should love one's neighbor as oneself (in general: the commandment of love and mercy), a conviction of fundamental human equality, the ethic of mutual assistance and of devoting oneself to the good of others, the idea of the existence of a kind of justice which transcends earthly justice, the separation of the order of God from the order of man ("Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's"), a basis for a common temporal chronology (which had earlier been done by Jewish thinkers), and finally, faith in the fundamental purposefulness of history. To complete this picture we ought to include the contribution of Judaism to the formation of European culture. It is this tradition that we have to thank for the ethic of the Ten Commandments, faith in the

formation of wisdom through learning, and the intellectual tradition of the interpretation

of texts (initially, of course, mostly holy texts). I have already mentioned the role of the

Enlightenment in the development of the modern European identity, so here I should like

only to add that in my opinion the Enlightenment and its ideas would not have been

possible without Christianity, and that therefore the tension that exists between these two

traditions I consider to be something on the order of a "family quarrel," though I know

that this matter remains controversial. However there can be no doubt that in general

terms European culture has always flourished upon its internal diversity and upon the

tensions that have existed between those diverse elements, and the conflict between

Christianity and the Enlightenment tradition I deem to have been fruitful for the culture as

a whole. This tension can in any event be treated as an example of a much older

phenomenon, dating back to the time of Constantine the Great, namely the tension

between the claims of the lay powers and those of the religious authorities. As Lord

Acton noted many years ago, this conflict favored the gradual widening of the sphere of

individual liberty and the liberation of the political dimension of social life from the

dimension regulated by religious authority.

Many aspects of European culture, as I remarked earlier, are unique, very clearly

demarcating Europe (the West) off from the rest of the world. Something which in this

context particularly bears mention is that to non-European cultures the following ideas

remain to a certain degree foreign: the separation of the temporal (lay) order from the

supernatural (holy) order, the significance of the individual and its priority over the

collectivity, the recognition of the state as representing the common good and as more

important that the good of the clan or tribe, the concept of legal government, in which the

rule of law governs rather than the whim of the ruler, the formal equality of men and women, the concept of human rights, and – last but not least – the idea of liberal democracy. (We must recall that the theory and the practice of democracy we owe to classical Greece, although it is obvious that that was not a liberal democracy.)

In conclusion two further remarks can be made. Firstly, we must remember that European culture is indebted in many ways to other cultures, from which it has learned much: the list of these other cultures would be long indeed, and here I shall mention only ancient Babylon and Egypt, the great Arab culture of the Middle Ages, and finally Europe's 19th- and 20th-century fascination with the Orient. Secondly, it is quite necessary to point out Europe's (and the West's) exceptionally rich legacy of evil inventions. It is here that mention must be made of the (pseudo)philosophically and (pseudo)scientifically justified ideas of racism, colonialism, xenophobia, and various forms of totalitarianism. Certainly this list of "sins" could be greatly extended. But this could be considered beside the point. What is important is that we must not fall into self-congratulation. Remembering that in European culture which is good, we must not forget what is bad. Only then will our defense of European values be convincing also for non-Europeans.

Andrzej Szahaj