

Beyond the Nation State – Cultures make Europe

Historic Speech to Europe series: Denis de Rougemont

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Confessing European Federalists seem a species in hiding. No wonder. Federalism is a curse word of Eurosceptics. Mainstream European politicians are on the defensive after years of an EU in crisis. Yet can it be that federalist ideas to which once were pinned so many hopes, offer no more solutions nowadays? Time to undust the speech “The federalist attitude” which Denis de Rougemont gave in 1947 in front of the first annual congress of the European Union of Federalists. On the occasion of its 60th anniversary, European Cultural Foundation decided to reexamine the convictions of its founding father de Rougemont. French Liberal Member of the European Parliament, Sylvie Goulard, was invited to relate the passages of de Rougemont’s speech to today’s EU. The passages themselves were presented by Raymond Georis, who had followed in de Rougemont’s steps as ECF Secretary General (1973-1994). The exchange took place in front of an audience of more than a hundred people in Brussels’ fine arts centre BOZAR, moderated by Vanessa Mock (EU correspondent for the Wall Street Journal) as part of a larger event entitled “Good morning Europe. Maintenant ou jamais”, organized in the context of the new European leadership.

Denis de Rougemont’s principles of federalism

Raymond Georis explained that de Rougemont’s political ideas were the result of his in-depth study of European identity and its many sources including Christianity, Judaism and Islam, set out in his 1939 work *L’Amour et l’Occident (Love in the Western World)*. In de Rougemont’s view, European identity, can only be protected against the “anti-Europe of nation states” through federalism – a union in diversity and a union for protecting diversity.

Georis then presented Rougemont’s principles and drew attention to the fact that de Rougemont considered his “principles of federalism” immediately applicable in 1947.

1 - “Federation is only possible if there is no question of any of the constituent nations exercising a role of hegemony.”

2 - “Federalism entails the renunciation of any particular kind of political system. ... federating means putting together, composing as well as one can the concrete, multiform realities formed by nations, economic regions and political and cultural traditions; arranging them in accordance with their particular characters; which must be respected and at the same time articulated into a whole.”

3 - *“Under federalism there is no such thing as a problem of minorities. ... To the federalist it is a matter of course that a minority can in some cases count as much or even more than a majority, because in his eyes it stands for an irreplaceable quality – or, one may say, a function.”*

4 - *“The object of federation is not to eliminate diversity and merge all nations into a single bloc, but on the contrary to safeguard their particular features. ... This is not even a matter of tolerance ... Each nation will be challenged to give of its best, in its own way and according to its genius.”*

5 - *“Federalism is based on love of complexity, in contrast to the crude simplicity of totalitarianism. I do mean love rather than respect or tolerance - the love of cultural, psychological and even economic complexities; such is the health of federalism.”*

Complex challenges or unnecessary complications?

De Rougemont’s fifth principle was picked up straight away: “Federalism is based on ... love of cultural, psychological and even economic complexities.” Sylvie Goulard responded that the complexity associated with Europe today is mostly a detrimental rather than a vital one – the EU is seen as complicating people’s lives. However, the solutions which today’s nationalists offer do not tackle any of today’s complex challenges, be it climate change, epidemics or capital flows. Goulard appealed to Europeans not to give nationalists the privilege of being seen to have the solutions, when they haven’t.

Diagnosing the European malaise

When de Rougemont put forward his principles of federalism in 1947, he couldn’t anticipate the complex institutional structure of today’s EU. The “renunciation of any particular kind of political system” which he said federalism entailed (principle two) was therefore a point, which participants of this debate couldn’t identify with. However, several participants homed in on one weakness of today’s EU: the way the European Parliament is elected. Sylvie Goulard asked voters to check their expectations: MEPs represent far too large regions to be well-known to their constituents. They should not be held responsible for electoral laws that are not made in the European Parliament. She even alleged “the European Member States never wanted to make the European Parliament an entirely legitimate institution.”

Others touched on the weak hold that the European project has on ordinary citizens: One participant deplored that “the European construction has no future as long as the fundamental values of Europe still don’t mean much to ordinary citizens.” A common and objective way of teaching children European history would help the promotion of these values.

Raymond Georis agreed that our education systems needs to be reformed so to become more European but underlined that our national approaches and

holding onto the principle of subsidiarity do not yet comply with de Rougemont's idea of a bottom-up Europe, based on the organization of local and regional communities.

Sylvie Goulard cautioned against contrasting "an elite that has understood everything with an undefined mass that has understood nothing." The contrast today was rather between those who at their level seek to open up – with the help of student exchanges, mobility grants for trainees, through town twinning activities etc – and many in high political offices who don't know their neighbouring countries from experience and don't speak any foreign languages. Moreover, many problems were being attributed to the EU when in fact they originate in the Member States. "The propagation of falsehoods by elites is more worrying than the false beliefs held by ordinary people."

A Europe of individuals organizing themselves

Asked about the idea of a Europe of states which German chancellor Merkel focused on in her speech at the College of Europe in November 2010, Sylvie Goulard called it a danger to emphasize the role of states. Invoking de Rougemont's sixth principle, she said that today as much as in the 1940s, the European community needed to consist of individuals who accept their responsibilities and organize themselves. Nevertheless, Sylvie Goulard also argued that nation states and national governments need not be demonized as part of a federal vision. However, the current problem was the tendency to abandon the idea of a referee, i.e. to curtail the role of the European Commission, and of collective rules in the collaboration of member states such as over the common currency.

Europe – a multitude of stories

Sylvie Goulard fully agreed with de Rougemont on the point that not all initiative for federating activities should come from state organisations. Her plea: "Don't neglect what already exists, the many professional networks that reach out across borders, the many citizens' initiatives with a European outlook." Regarding the contribution of internet to a European space, Goulard stated "The internet helps to make Europe through the multitude of stories that it renders accessible; the European Commission should therefore look at the internet not just in terms of an infrastructure for communications, but also at the European cultural, intellectual and research content which it can circulate.

Federalism – an unstable equilibrium

Raymond Georis expressed his incomprehension at nationalist movements in Europe: "There is nothing imperialist in Europe today, why rebel?" Denis de Rougemont at no point advocated for the autonomy of regions from nation states, although he considered that there were regional cultures rather than national ones. He did not see incompatibility between cultural autonomy and liberal democracy.

Sylvie Goulard highlighted that de Rougemont saw federalism as a permanent play of diversity, subsidiarity and the respect of the local on the one hand, and the necessity for supranational organization on the other. This idea, so Goulard, was ever more pertinent today where “the focus on subsidiarity does not help Europe to compete against China, it makes Europeans compete against each other in the face of China; it does not protect the rights of individuals, it often goes against them.”

From European to global engagement

An American audience member asked, “once the European identity is established, will there be a humanist, global, non-sectarian coming together of people?”, Raymond Georis responded that the values of liberal democracy and human rights, that are now partly considered universal, have been developed in Europe. In this sense European identity had already had a global impact. The contestation of these values in certain places meant that the different cultures had to continue the conversation about global values. Sylvie Goulard pointed out that there would never be a day “when we will say ‘the European identity is finished, now we can start with global identity’”. A global demos is already emerging and “the next generation, even more so than ours, will have global problems to solve, and for that our governance systems are not yet equipped.”

Conclusion

Surprisingly, de Rougemont’s first principle that in a federation there “is no question of any of the constituent nations exercising a role of hegemony” was not picked up on. Is it not a recurrent theme though that Germany “dictates the policy of the Eurozone” or that the UK “holds the EU to ransom with its threat of exiting”? Neither did de Rougemont’s third principle get any attention: “Under federalism there is no such thing as a problem of minorities.” States with very small populations have been given a ‘nationality bonus’ where voting rights in the EU Council are concerned, but have other kinds of minorities, the large Roma minority, for example, ever “counted as much or even more than a majority”?

Yet judging by this debate, at least two of Denis de Rougemont’s ideas are today as relevant as ever: Europe’s success relies on individuals forming “varied networks of European exchange” (principle six) without expecting the tutelage of state institutions. Moreover, a “love of complexity” (principle five) still needs to be cultivated. It does not contrast with “the crude simplicity of totalitarianism” any more, but with the simplistic populism of EU opponents.

The mission and history of European Cultural Foundation is a tribute to de Rougemont’s sixth principle: ECF has helped create a multitude of “networks of European exchange” – from the development and management of the Erasmus programme (1976-1995) to its many initiatives to bring the people of east and west together, or to support people in “making Europe through culture”. No better celebration of ECF’s 60th anniversary than to remember the intellectual foundation laid by Denis de Rougemont in 1947.