

No country for old men

The weekly newspapers Die Zeit publicized an article on June 22 with the title “Griechenland gehört zu uns” (Greece belongs to us) written by Helmut Schmidt, the German Social Democratic politician, former Minister of Defense, Economy and Finance, as well as, at least briefly, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Schmidt is the oldest surviving German Chancellor and the last surviving person to have been solely Chancellor of West Germany before Germany got reunified.

Why these detailed references to a politician’s long gone carrier? Because I am shocked to see how a man of his stature seems unable to think beyond outmoded margins, national, intellectual and ideological ones. Schmidt embodies European history and lacks the vision current Europe calls for – a grounded daredevilness that radiates with unity consciousness, politically and spiritually.

The crisis of Greece is our crisis, a European one, Schmidt says. That sounds noble, and embracing. But what follows is the worn out rationale of fear and doubt that has blinded post-war Europe long enough.

Schmidt points to the looming threats resulting from the fact that Europe is the sole continent whose population is dramatically ageing and shrinking. In the year 2050 its global GDP will decrease from 30% to 10%, and this is, so the author, why we should cling on to the Greeks – and, I assume, everyone else whose guts we can’t stand unless we do the maths.

Schmidt continues: “These days where milliards (of Euros, LF) are of importance every day, we also have to consider two and a half thousand years of history.” Greece being the cradle of democracy, Renaissance, and Enlightenment, is the mother of all of European civilization, he adds, and then deduces: “Some of the top policy makers in Greece might be corrupt, but their ancestors and their history deserve respect.” That and the Acropolis, to his mind, exemplify argument number two why the Greeks must stay with us.

If the Germans have reason to admire the Greeks for their ancestors’ accomplishments, then the Greeks have reason to hate the formers’ grandfathers for their injustices. Weighing the past is unwise. Momentary



actions become stories, and subjective facts turn into phenomenal objects, memories maybe. Irrelevant really and easy to abuse.

Rhetoric like Schmidt uses it creates a parallel universe to the current reality of an ever-changing international and intercultural texture of interdependent needs and desires. History can be inspiring but not enlightening for the present challenges: As old systems and beliefs are uprooted in an unprecedented speed today, we luckily don't have the time to look behind us too much, and those who insist to run with their heads turned backwards will bump into a signpost reading "now".

A window of susceptibility has opened up that appears to offer enough room to try something new. Europe needs each other in fresh ways, if not as friends then as visionary accomplices to redefine its unity in and with the world. Change is here, and we need to have the courage to call it what it is: a chance, and not a crisis.

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