
OPENING ADDRESS

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The subject of this conference is rooted in a paradox: “the assertion of cultural identity, particularly within multicultural societies, is likely to weaken economic and social solidarity”. Never mind, many would say. Indeed, most of us believe that the defence of our cultural identity is a stringent need, if one wants to avoid the alienation of citizens, of groups, of entire populations, if one wants to fight successfully what I called “the onitude”, the rule of ONE, that most impersonal of all pronouns, the reign of dehumanizing structures and impersonal, almost abstract authorities, which control, manage and reign over our contemporary societies and which constitute a technocratic big brother without a face, without a profile, let alone a humane glance, although our citizens have the opportunity to contemplate every evening at the 8 o’clock news the faces of the ruling or opposing politicians. These decide, govern, administer above the heads of the citizens. I would like to coin this contemporary alienation: “the they-ification”, a kind of frustration which the great sociologists of the XIXth and XXth centuries, like Karl Marx and Max Weber were unable to foresee; a frustration which obviously gives rise in many countries to populism and new forms of demagogic flattering of the voters.

The problems tabled by this conference were to a certain extent identified by the European authorities and those who negotiated and drafted the founding treaties of the European union. The Columbus egg was the introduction, in the Treaty of Maastricht, of “subsidiarity”, a concept borrowed from the social teaching of the catholic church and more particularly from the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Subsidiarity attempts to reconcile identitarian particularism with supranational harmonization and efficiency. But those who worry about the effectiveness and the coherence of the European Union also know that subsidiarity must be bi-directional: downwards and upwards. There is a subsidiarity towards the bottom which acknowledges decentralized competences. But there is also a subsidiarity towards the top which centralizes certain competences at a level that is inevitably more or less supranational. We know that it is not easy to find a point of balance between descending and ascending subsidiarity. The European Convention, currently in session in Brussels, wants to make an attempt at clarification by circumscribing competences. *Kompetenzabgrenzung* as it is called in eurocratic jargon.

In fact, the debate that this conference is launching relates to the limits of nationalism. When restricted to the defence of the economic and cultural interests of the community to which one belongs, there is in most cases nothing reprehensible about nationalism, providing no harm is done to other communities. The cultural promotion of a population or a people in general corresponds to this standard. This nationalism is comparable on a lesser scale with the assumption of responsibility in the defence of personal or family interests. The problems emerge when nationalism is implemented to the detriment of other communities or groups of people.

Take the case of Belgium. The total scission of our social security system, would reduce the rate of poverty in Flanders from 5% to 3% but would increase it in Wallonie from 8% today to 16% tomorrow. This would constitute a “painful zero-sum game”, in my opinion irreconcilable with the promotion of the common good, the public interest and solidarity among citizens. On the other hand when Flanders or Wallonie, take advantage of their constitutional autonomy and develop their economies or their cultural flourishing, the other community will probably benefit from a spill-over effect. This would lead to a positive-sum game, where everyone would win. Cultural identity in a multicultural society should be taken care of in a way that promotes mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation.

The aim of this conference is to enable us to listen to each other and hopefully, to draw some useful conclusions. It is to promote more understanding, more humanity, and by doing so to help avoid many potential little and bigger clashes of civilization. Such a dialogue is the only way to cope with the major challenge of today and tomorrow: how to transform our increasingly multicultural societies into true, peaceful and fraternal intercultural communities.