

SOCIÉTÉ EUROPÉENNE DE CULTURE

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Introduction to the European Society of Culture (SEC)

before the Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament, Tuesday 11 September 2007, in Luxembourg

Objectives

The European Society of Culture was founded in Venice in 1950, inspired by an idea and on the initiative of the Italian philosopher Umberto CAMPAGNOLO (1904-1976), by around three hundred writers, scientists and artists dominant on the European cultural scene of the time (Benedetto CROCE, Thomas MANN, Henri MATISSE, Karl BARTH, François MAURIAC...). The stated objective of the SEC was to encourage men and women not normally involved in politics to take collective responsibility in an effort to promote dialogue, cooperation, peace and a united Europe.

The Society provided this ethical and political engagement with a theoretical foundation starting from the concept of «politics of culture»: a politics seen as necessary in times of crisis and transformation, a politics of invention, able to bypass of head-on clashes. This politics of non-politicians, termed «politics of culture» presupposes a dynamic definition of culture: culture as the creation of values, of ethical values.

The SEC's work is grounded in constantly up-dated research, analysis and reflection on issues of pressing contemporary relevance, not in an academic spirit but with the aim of identifying priority areas for the engagement of the politics of culture. It sees in genuine dialogue an indispensable instrument for the politics of culture, whose theoretical basis the Society continues to investigate, whilst disseminating the knowledge and practice of this idea.

It is undoubtedly *the Society's assertion of the existence of Europe, both East and West, its defence of the principle of dialogue and implementation of a non-partisan dialogue during the long years of the Cold War*, which have characterized it most strongly. The SEC played a leading role during this period, when Europe was separated into two blocs, proclaiming the principle of dialogue in the face of all opposition and ensuring that people of culture from both East and West had regular opportunities to meet with a view to shared action, despite their divergences on the level of politics as it is normally understood.

In today's different context, the need for rigorous and authentic dialogue is no less pressing. *The SEC is aware of this and has been working for several years on intercultural and interreligious issues in the interests of true peace, without ever losing sight of the union of Europeans*. It has also studied the phenomena of disintegration and the formation of new groupings, again with a view to the active role which cultural forces may play, in accordance with a vision of the future that emphasises the sources of unity.

Work since 2000¹

A brief outline of the Society's most recent work cannot fail to mention first of all that it did not hesitate to give its fiftieth anniversary session in 2000 the ambitious title: «*Towards a Politics of Mankind*», thus opening the politics of culture and giving it a broad and powerful perspective on a new century, at the dawn of a new millennium. This discussion made it possible to highlight those areas where the awareness of a politics of mankind and for mankind has taken steps forward, whilst simultaneously identifying some significant areas of heavy shortfall.

¹ For the SEC's work before 2000 please refer to the leaflet included in the dossier, which lists the main titles.

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Of these areas, two topics were formulated and subsequently dealt with in greater depth: «*The Requirement of Democracy as a Criterion for International Legitimation and a Factor for Peace*» (2001) and later «*The Growing Role of Civil Society as a Political Subject and the Responsibilities of Culture*» (2002).

In 2003, the Romanian SEC Centre hosted the Society's plenary session in Bucharest. The study theme was formulated as follows. «*Culture and Cultures in Europe and Beyond*», a debate on the relationship between culture, defined by the SEC as the creation of values, culture in the singular, and cultures, in other words the multiple and infinitely varied expressions of culture. The conclusion was that «Thus defined, culture by definition recognizes cultures in the plural among its forms of expression, as a value, and treats them as such, making potential motives for conflict meaningless».

Immediately after the enlargement of the European Union to 25 Member States in 2004, in a closed session at Weimar the SEC's work centred on the following question: «*Intra-European Dialogue from East to West: New Challenges*»; these challenges were perceived as springing mainly from the insufficient participation of citizens.

In 2005 at Venice, the General Assembly debated the theme «*From the European Union to the Union of Europeans*». The objective was defined as follows: "To bring together from all reaches of the SEC, including the Americas, knowledge and opinions on the state of societies in relation to the institutional structure of the European Union which is taking shape and ramifying; to attempt to take stock of the great hopes which have been raised but also the gap which exists between these two realities. Above all, however, to renew the critical and affirmative awareness of "Europeanness", *qua* stripped of contingent interests; to reinforce in this direction the task of culture, which is to render this awareness present and effective, in the conviction that these are the foundations from which the institutional structure which best meets the needs of history, today and tomorrow, may grow".

In 2006, two special meetings took place in Kazan (Tatarstan), where the SEC now has a «base», and in Moscow, in collaboration with the Russian centre. These dealt respectively with the need for dialogue between religions and people of different civilizations («*Politics of Culture in the Dialogue between Civilizations*») and a topic formulated by our Moscow colleagues: «*European Values and Mass Culture*».

The most recent plenary session (and XXVIIIth ordinary general assembly) took place from 18 to 20 May of 2007 at Pescia in Tuscany. This turned on a subject of great contemporary relevance: «*The Crises of the Present and the Ethical Benchmark: an Appeal for Dialogue*», a choice motivated as follows:

“ In our shrinking world, the hotbeds of crisis are legion and the globalization of communications means they can no longer be ignored. Fundamental givens are changing everywhere, realities are being transformed, whilst an awareness of these and the capacity to respond to them requires a difficult and conflictual maturation process and, doubtless more important still, courageous acts of invention. Numerous experiences and reflections serve to illustrate this state of affairs: crises in the domains of religion, politics, law, science, education and the arts”, the environment, and the formation of Europe...”

Some contributions to the debate:

Henri BARTOLI, Vice-President

Values «are neither generic ideas nor absolute realities known *a priori*. Their remarkable property is that they only appear when freedom evokes them, adopts them, dedicates or devotes itself to them. We do not want them if we do not make them... hence, the key idea of a politics of culture, not moralizing or idealizing chatter on the ills of the planet and its inhabitants but critical discernment aimed at identifying the signs of

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the times and interpreting them in the light of culture and its *raison d'être*; not the contemptuous rejection of ordinary politics but an effort to imbue it with the need for human solidarity»

“Irrevocable Europe” said the President of the SEC, Vincenzo CAPPELLETTI, when its first Vice-President, Arrigo LEVI, recalled his profound conviction that dialogue is that «*weak force*» of words, of faith, of hope which allowed for the reconciliation of the blind peoples of Europe, locked in mutual hatred, and which should lead, through a shared aspiration to universality, to the «*second creation of humans*» which became necessary after the invention of the ultimate weapon.

More than ever, dialogue, this «spiritual process determined by the encounter of two different ideas tending towards a common truth» in the words of the SEC’s founder, Umberto CAMPAGNOLO, and «*Weltethos*» (a theory developed by the theologian Hans KÜNG) are revealed as the principal theoretical foundations upon which to combat effectively the lack of solidarity, not to say selfishness (individual, national or oligarchic), which is the cause of increasingly unbearable ruptures, inequalities and injustices, but also of the shortage of democracy which can be observed in politics in the ordinary sense of the word.

The Vice-President of the SEC and Member of the European Parliament Bronislaw GEREMEK concluded the debate, stressing three themes:

- the importance of debate on Europe and *the place of the European message in the world*, on the foundation of a Europe open in its diversity, a possessor and creator of shared values;
- *the nobility of the political act* when it takes into account the common good and not simple power play and immediate interests, which lead to the temptation to authoritarianism or its submersion in mundane concerns;
- finally, *the ethical foundations of a politics allied with a value-creating culture* and the need to reinforce these by defending the rule of law, the control of power, the development of civil society and finally the freedom of speech and creation.

This is the concrete utopia of the «European dream». The survival of mankind requires a moral standpoint which sees others neither as competitors nor as objects of consumption.

As early as 1995, the SEC, in the concluding text of a special meeting: “*People of culture faced with the forces of disintegration and globalization in today’s society*”, a text known as the «Budapest Appeal», proclaimed the urgent need for a politics of culture able to counter the threat represented by the spread of a culture of mass consumption. Universally identical and wholly anonymous, a «true zero degree of the culture of creation» in the words of Paul RICOEUR, mass culture is destructive of the core values on which the cultures of the populations which it attacks and seduces are based and generates identity crises detrimental to peace.

The Increasing Role of Culture in European Integration

The European Union increasingly sees in culture an aspect of and factor in its own formation. The President of the Commission, Mr José Manuel BARROSO, has stressed this on several occasions and in particular in Berlin at the beginning of his term of office, on the occasion of the first Berliner Konferenz entitled “A Soul for Europe”, according to the expression used by Jacques DELORS. He declared that: «*The EU has reached a stage of its history where its cultural dimension can no longer be ignored*». On 10 May of this year, 2007, the Commission published the text of a communication dealing for the first time with culture in the broadest terms. This was the «Communication on a European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World».

It is in this new context, in keeping with its means and capacities, that the SEC hopes to contribute to these reflections and more specifically to the Union’s programme for the year 2008, the European Year of

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Intercultural Dialogue in view of European citizenship, and to that of the following year, 2009, the European Year of Creativity, as well as to the 2007-2013 Culture Programme.

Brief Description of the European Society of Culture's Organizational Structure.

With its international headquarters in Venice², the SEC functions according to the statutes voted in by its constitutive assembly on 1 June 1950³.

INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

Current President: Vincenzo CAPPELLETTI, *historian and philosopher of science, former Vice-President of the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, President of the Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici.*

First Vice-President: Arrigo LEVI, *journalist, writer, external relations advisor to the President of the Italian Republic.*

Vice-Presidents:

Henri Bartoli, *economist, Sorbonne*

Iring Fetscher, *political scientist, Goethe Universität, Frankfurt a/M*

Bronislaw Geremek, *historian, Warsaw University, M.E.P.*

Alexander Kudryavtsev, *architectural historian, President of the Russian Academy of Architecture*

Diego Valadés, *jurist, National Autonomous University of Mexico*

International General Secretary: Michelle Campagnolo Bouvier, *woman of letters*

Director of the journal "Comprendre": Giuseppe Galasso, *historian, publicist, Federico II University, Naples*

Vice President by right: the Mayor of Venice, currently Massimo Cacciari; formerly Paolo Costa, M.E.P.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD

AUDITORS

ACTIVITIES:

² Villa Hériot, Giudecca 54P, 30133 Venice.

³ See the XIVth and last edition, 1998, which also contains the "official documents" of the Society, including its declarations and final resolutions.

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The general assembly convenes for an ordinary general meeting every two years. Debate hinges on a broad theme of contemporary importance and its impact on the politics of culture, after which work is planned up until the following plenary session; annual meeting of the executive committee; other meetings, seminars, exhibitions of documents etc.

There are around fifteen National Centres, mainly in Europe in the broader sense but also in North and South America and in Israel, whose activity is complementary.

The SEC has some 1500 members in sixty countries. They can be considered the means of transmission, sometimes via the media, by which the objectives and engagement promoted by the SEC reach the public.

Finally, the SEC has its own journal, in principle an annual publication: «COMPRENDRE», a politics of culture journal. After its foundation, this journal, with a print run of 2000 copies, ran for 50 issues. It is envisaged that publication, currently suspended, will resume⁴.

Outline of Relations with International Organizations:

- Council of Europe: in late 2006 the SEC presented a request for accreditation to become a member of the group of ONGs which have participatory status with the Council of Europe. This request is due to be granted shortly. At present, the SEC is an observer within the Education and Culture ONG grouping, whilst awaiting full membership.
- UNESCO: A procedure is underway at UNESCO, of great importance especially in the context of the implementation of the recent Convention on the protection of cultural diversity, which aims to reactivate the SEC's consultative status, category B.
- European Union: the SEC debates the best way of integrating the platform of civil society in order to be informed, to participate in the work of other ONGs with a cultural agenda and to be consulted by the Commission. It also follows the work of the European Parliament and its Culture and Education Commission.

PROJECTS AND REQUIREMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF CULTURE

Projects

During its last plenary session, the SEC noted the importance of launching the following projects:

- the introduction of a «*Politics of Culture*» module as part of a Masters degree in European Civilization which could take place each year in Venice.
- the inclusion of *this aspect of the «politics of culture»* in the curriculum of a network of European Universities, overseen by a "Commission pour la Formation".
- the *networking of the SEC's National Centres*, in order to ensure an optimal dissemination of their work via intranet and increased cooperation.

⁴ See the printed leaflet included in the dossier for the main titles of inquiries included in the journal «Comprendre».

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- the *resumption* of publication of the Journal «Comprendre».
- the publication of a catalogue of the SEC Archives.

Requirements

The core structure of the SEC, domiciled in Italy (International Office, International General Secretariat, Publications Office, Administration, Library, Archives) functions mainly thanks to funding from the Italian State, through the Ministry of Culture, with triennial grants that have been renewed since 1984. Previously, the Society benefited from *ad hoc* funding by the Italian Parliament and still earlier from subsidies from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

Whilst the whole Society wishes to stress the importance of the recognition and support which Italy has given from 1948 to a European institution with French as its main language, it must nonetheless acknowledge the increasing insufficiency of these funds.

These means are insufficient even to guarantee the work of a minimal staff able to undertake the numerous tasks needed to support the life and activities of the Society and the promotion of its objectives.

In order to pursue its work to the benefit of European culture, and particularly on intercultural and interreligious dialogue, which it believes it can competently accomplish, the SEC requires additional means. This is why, among other initiatives, it will respond in October to a call for proposals with a view to obtaining a «Support for Bodies Active at European level in the Field of Culture» subsidy in 2008⁵.

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⁵ Call for proposals EACEA no. 22/2007: Support for bodies Active at European level in the field of Culture (leaflet 2) Culture Programme 2007-2013.