

***POLITICS OF CULTURE
IN THE DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS
Kazan, 14-16 giugno 2006***

***Dialogue and Politics of Culture in and through the
Société Européenne de Culture***

A more demanding title could not have been chosen for the first time the Société Européenne de Culture (S.E.C.) / European Society of Culture (ESC) expresses itself in noble Kazan. It centers the very nature of our institution, resorting to its principal concepts, from which descend both goals and achievements.

Why say "demanding" instead of easy? Easy, because we are, so to say, playing in our most familiar courtyard. We say "demanding", because we strongly feel the responsibility, if not fully to explain, which would be impossible, at least to give a clear idea of the weight, the importance, originality and capacity of orientation these concepts hold in themselves. We feel a responsibility in avoiding their banalization, even before they have been apprehended in their essence. Somewhat in the way crown jewels too generously exposed might without warning be taken for a cheap imitation.

One of those two concepts: dialogue is absolutely current and used constantly; the other, politics of

culture, is somewhat mysterious and therefore easily misinterpreted. So both, although for opposed reasons, call for explanation and of course much reading of SEC texts.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a fashionable word. It is constantly used in every domain and for every kind of exchange and in every circumstance. It has become a habit to speak of dialogue also between governments, between States, between institutions, which, by their very nature, practice negotiation. This is confusing, but it also represents an interesting symptom.

Members of SEC who are able to go back to its earlier years, may not have forgotten that in the sixties already, the founder, Umberto Campagnolo, underlined this situation and hence the necessity to insist over and over again on SEC's work in the matter of dialogue and the idea of dialogue. According to it, uncommitted conversation is not pertaining to it, no more than simple exchange of information and views. SEC intends and acts dialogue as an engaged confrontation on controversial questions, that is to say the very questions which are problematic and engender conflict, supposing concurrent interests. These are the questions, the difficult ones on which SEC holds dialogue to be tried and practiced. On such questions positive results are attained, if there exists a common will to overcome

the divergences. In the matter of dialogue, and not only, SEC tends to consider that the difficult way without short cuts in the end is the one which leads to real and lasting results. Two sentences drawn from texts of the founder may here be quoted: "You must always admit that other people may possess a truth valid and valuable for you as well". "Dialogue shall be understood as the spiritual process determined by the encounter of two different ideas aiming at a common truth."

It goes without saying that in SEC dialogue is understood on the interpersonal level.

How has this concept of dialogue been practically applied and lived, throughout the sixty years of SEC history? How far has it been promotional? In what sense is it possible to speak of success?

When first the idea of a European Society of Culture was launched by Umberto Campagnolo in 1946, the immense relieve caused by the end of war had already begun to give room to a new season. Having vanquished the common enemy, the allied powers drifted back towards their own politics of power. The division of Europe and in its wake of the whole world between an Eastern and a Western bloc began to crystallize. Among attentive and aware observers (hommes de culture), the threat such a process represented for constructive dialogue was acutely felt. Precisely in the preamble of the Statute of SEC, one of the main reasons to create this new body was to counteract this threat of interrupted dialogue between

the two parts of Europe. Together with it went the affirmation that Europe existed and was Europe in the East as much as in the West.

The founder ideally saw this new body, the SEC, as: *"The organ of the present day social function of culture. A function essentially of fostering peace and liberty, peace and liberty being indissoluble insofar as absolutely interdependent ... This rather new conception of culture is already shared by many and the awareness of their responsibility grows ever more efficaciously among "les hommes de culture..."*.

The task to defend the principle of dialogue, to try and practice it, to maintain it in its deep sense has been one of the major efforts of the SEC throughout the many years of the Cold War. One has to go back with a historical insight to the various periods of the Cold War in order to understand how difficult this dialogue was, how unusual and courageous, needing to fight scepticism and mistrust on both parts, but no less watching not to get instrumentalized.

In this respect, we mention one important moment: It was in 1956 only, just half a century ago, that the first East-West encounter took place in Venice with the inaugurated participation, of personalities from the Soviet Union. They were: Constantin Féline, the President of the Soviet Writers' Association, the writer and journalist Boris Polevoi, editor of the magazine Junost and the art historian, famous through his work on Andrej Rublov, Mikhail Alpatov. It took a whole week of

strenuous discussion on the nature, the possibility and the necessity of dialogue, conducted with the already members: Antony Babel, Giovanni Ponti, Umberto Campagnolo, Ignazio Silone, Marko Ristic, Karl Barth, John D. Bernal, Vercors, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Jacques Havet, Guido Piovene, Alan Pryce-Jones, Stephen Spender, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Carlo Levi, to join to an agreement on the quality of the dialogue as intended in the SEC. Their acceptance of the Statute followed and their becoming members. Among the first Soviet members we may also mention Ilya Ehrenbourg, Boris Pasternak, Victor Lazaref and Boris Piotrovsky.

Immerged in the general evolution, but with the constant will to overcome the barriers, this demanding dialogue has been carried on. It meant much in a time when ideological positions and oppositions were strong and the idea of peace, which was the common goal, covered a wide range of prospects: SEC intended and intends "peace that does not have war as alternative".

At the great historical turning point of the years 1989-90, which continues to determine our days, the SEC lived another important moment I want to remember here: In February 1990, our still Soviet Center of SEC - today Russian Center, while there is a Georgian Center and a small group in Armenia - invited to an important meeting not a few of us remember. The topic was: "Cultural Europe: common sources, divergent developments, new collaboration". It was an extraordinary moment, due to a

general feeling as if a screen had disappeared, allowing dialogue to gain a new quality of directness. We may underline that the then claimed possibility and reality of new collaboration is a still dominant, but many more paces have to be done. Let me mention here that the proceedings of this meeting have been published in Russian and a few copies are here at your disposal. The final document may be considered as a standing engagement.

Today we are aware that dialogue knows new challenges, which have to be met and will be a necessity of many years: inter-religious dialogue to start with. There exists the conviction that if understanding between religions (which means, of course, between men of different faiths) as well as collaboration worked, world peace would be assured. The catholic dissident theologian Hans Küng is a main exponent of this conviction and commitment. Following the SEC founder's thought and doctrine, we rather see the obstacle in the still existing and determining international order of sovereignties risking to clash.

Without any doubt however, our days and years have to be devoted to dialogue between civilizations, in a shrinking world, where the gap between objective interdependence and consciously assumed solidarity remains immense. It is our present topic.

As I wrote in my introductory page, we are fully appreciating this opportunity offered here in Kazan,

where first steps are meant to be done in the study and hopefully in the practice of such fundamental dialogue, conducted in the spirit of the SEC.

Politics of Culture

Politics of Culture is a concept forged in SEC. It is at the core of thought and action. If we have good reasons to remain convinced of the originality of SEC's reality, still uncovered by any other initiative it is mainly due to the idea of politics of culture.

This idea is grounded in a very broad and open definition of culture. Culture not as the conservation of already existing, already created works of art, or of literature, it is a culture embracing every domain of human invention and creation. Culture as the creation of values, namely moral values. According to this view, where there is an act of invention, there is an act of culture. From such a dynamic definition of culture naturally springs the consequence of a politics of culture.

Many definition of this politics of culture have been given and should be given here. To start let us read two passages on politics of culture by our founder: "*The politics of culture supposes the moral essence and social reality of culture ... It stands in a point, ideal and real at the same time, existing between two historical moments, one present, the other future,*

conscious of its duty to contribute to the formation of the latter...".

"Its radical humanism: politics of culture springs from the possibility existing in cultural actors to have a dominating view of the political life. With this dominating view it participates in it; its role being to prepare the synthesis of antagonistic forces. Its function might be seen as the humanization of history. It is an expression of the endeavours to substitute conscious reason to the brute play of events..."

Politics of culture is responsible moral and political action by the non-political, in the belief that they have a duty to reflect on the general evolution in societies and in the international relations and indicate long term goals. The method is not seen in giving lessons to the professional leaders in politics, but trying to have an influence on civil society. It appears to have an important function in times of crisis, change, transition, when the order, created for the previous situation, no longer corresponds to the new situation. Again it must be said that SEC has chosen the difficult part: foster adjustments in society, without possessing effective power, but through moral authority and cultural prestige. However each of you will be able to evoke for himself illustrious examples of men and women of culture having had and having in some way influence on general developments. This is not the case only for very famous

persons; many act as ferments to ripen insights among people.

At this point it may be told that our Society, on the initiative of its Polish Center, years ago promoted the idea of a Politics of Culture Prize of SEC. This suggestion was accepted. If I mention just one Laureate of this Honorary Prize, his well known example may give a clear idea of what is meant by politics of culture. We have the great pleasure to have with us the laureate of the year 1993, our dear Vice-President, Bronislaw Geremek. His human adventure has led him to the more than partial sacrifice of a regular University career and of the work of a historian contributing fundamental insights in Medieval history, because he felt that times of crisis and change asked for taking a direct and personal part in orienting them in the direction of freedom, democracy and peace. Once entered with full responsibilities in the political agora, even as Minister of Foreign Affairs of his country, and right now as a member of the European Parliament with a special task, his acting remained faithful to the great ideals common to every person of good will and did not serve partial interests.

When the essence of politics in the ordinary sense and of politics of culture is understood and made one's own, as well as their dialectic relation, we are convinced that a precious instrument is given for the promotion of mutual understanding and collaboration.

Our statutory task is to study and reflect on the present of history and to analyse the main lines which characterize the precise moment we live in. This task is not a goal in itself, but it is the condition to be able to indicate major objectives for Politics of Culture.

Throughout all these years we have tried to do justice to this task and if we look back to the questions treated and the work accomplished, we may say that we have honoured it.

Let us hope that with these useful and precious instruments, dialogue and politics of culture, the space opened here in Kazan will become, with the help of new friends, a building site for mutual understanding and collaboration.

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