

Liberté pour l’histoire – or towards an EU-Dienst-academia?

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Introduction

My brief contribution to the *Forum Historiae*, to which I was kindly invited by my friend Gabriela Dudeková, SAV History, Bratislava, should be understood as a *reverie* or perhaps an *essay* in the European tradition of Montaigne. I do not claim to be an expert on EU legislation or higher education policy.

My brief reflections, that is the liberty I take to freely express my concerns, do not claim to present a concise analysis of the cluster of potential problems for historical research the wise initiators of the *Appel de Blois* have pointed out. As a supporter of liberty in society and above all, academic research in all fields, and this includes seemingly uninteresting research about e.g. the width of Inuit slides in 19th Century Greenland, I would just like to present a few modest thoughts about the rightful concerns of the initiators of the *Liberté pour l’histoire*. My reflections are influenced by personal experience: first, as a historian of ideas I specialise in the 19th century political thought of the Slavic nations. While most of my colleagues do not contest that there is such a thing as Russian philosophy and Russian political thought, many still believe that there is no political thought in the Central European states because of the Cold War divide. “Czech and Slovak political thought? That does not exist”! they argue, and they should really know it better. Just because they themselves know nothing about a distinct topic does not mean that the topic does not exist. Second, the recent student protests against the Bologna system call for thinking about the increasing technologisation and economisation of higher education. In November, students all over Europe briefly occupied the main auditoriums of their universities to protest against the Bologna system. Some of their demands addressed the following issues: Sponsorship should not dictate the contents of the curricula; studies would deteriorate to a chase for ECTS points; student fees should be cancelled and access to higher education, on the whole, should be free

to everybody. I share some of the students' concerns, which I think, have their origins in the perception that they have, because of the Bologna system, lost something valuable: a few years of freely reflecting, studying, finding their own personal identity and, as my esteemed colleague Ursula Pia Jauch put it, 'they feel instinctively betrayed'. University policy is always a difficult path between autonomy and functionality; the masses that enroll require assistance by technology to ensure that each student can enjoy fair and equal treatment. On the other hand, I find it difficult to support the idea that one should get a university degree without actually attending classes or paying zero fees. But utopian ideas are a privilege of youth and student protests a European tradition.

Different histories and historical perceptions within the EU

In May 2009, the Central European states celebrated five years of EU membership, with Bulgaria and Romania celebrating two years. After German reunification in 1990, the East Germans automatically became EU citizens. Following the successful democratic revolutions of 1989, all post-communist states in Central Europe declared membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO and the EU to be their principal political and economic goals, the memories of Soviet-type socialism still being fresh. Yet, how do 'younger' and 'older' European states deal with EU institutions, laws and regulations now, twenty years after the revolutions and two and five years, respectively, after achieving membership? How do they deal with their past under "dem real existent gewesenen Sozialismus (the reality of socialism)" as the distinguished philosopher Hermann Lübbe put it when referring to the SED state? How do societies perceive the EU and, above all, how does EU membership and legislation affect those societies' efforts to come to terms with the past?

German reunification and Central European states becoming members of the EU brought to a close a historic and disturbing chapter for the majority of citizens. The period between 1945 and 1989, as well as the war years, were seen in a different light. Opinions and perspectives that could not be voiced in public while Europe was separated by a Cold War of competing ideologies were now being openly expressed. Literary works reflecting on these times are central points of reference. In Western Germany, the author Martin Walser started a debate about forgetting in 1990. It was no coincidence that, around the same time, the lectures of W.G. Sebald on literature and the war in the air took the thinking and pain of the perpetrators as their theme. This was a new topic that had not been a public issue before 1992. Previously unpublished works of the post-war period emerged, such as Heinrich Böll's "The Silent Angel". The fall of the Berlin Wall created a new reality one had to adapt to, partly in an anxious, partly in a bold-spirited way. Jeremy Rifkin expresses a distinct euphoria in his "The European Dream: How Europe's vision of the future is quietly eclipsing the American dream", published in 2004. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, by contrast, can hardly meet

any response to that enthusiasm in his book “Ach Europa!”. Jürgen Habermas is even more cautious in his reflexions entitled “Ach, Europa”: he questions not only Rifkin’s quiet eclipse of the American dream, but refers to a silent scepticism about a united Europe and its relation to power. Lastly, power issues dividing the ‘older’ from the ‘younger’ members and stemming from Cold War thinking and ideas of Western superiority were made perfectly clear by French president Jacques Chirac, who reprimanded the Polish government in December 2005, declaring that “they have missed a good opportunity to shut up.” France led the European opposition to the war in Iraq, while the Polish government supported the U.S. How do the ‘younger’ members deal with the claim for superiority of the ‘older’?

In the “other Europe” (Jacques Rupnik), the communist regimes had continuously and tiresomely reminded its population of the victory over the Nazi regime, which legitimated communism in an ethical-political fashion. The ideology of Marxism-Leninism evoked a notable degree of motivation in the years following the end of the war. Yet, with the collapse of communism, many dissident authors lost their inspiration: the regimes they wrote against had vanished literally overnight to be replaced by a new and rapidly changing social and political environment. Soon, however, a new object of criticism emerged: democratisation and its goal of membership in the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Uncontrolled, inhuman capitalism, loneliness and social decline, as well as the perceived loss of the recently achieved sovereignty from EU legislators, became the new focuses of criticism. Coming to terms with the years during and after World War II presented an arena of vehement debate, as the socialist regimes had blocked any interpretation of the past that did not fit their own. Examples here are the debate about the *Beneš decrees*, as well as the *Jedwabne debate* initiated by the American-Polish sociologist Jan Tomas Gross. The expulsion of the Germans from Central Europe and the Holocaust are still contested topics.

Indeed, it seems that a kind of *new European consciousness* is emerging, which is eager to keep pace with globalisation and is now being challenged by the financial crisis the economies of the ‘mature’ democracies have created. Or could it be possible that EU administrators and politicians actually are trying to construct such an EU consciousness?

What are the principal topics of the history of Europe? How does Europe, ‘old’ and ‘new’, remember and how does it deal with current political and economic problems? Here, a couple of questions that came to my mind while thinking about the significance of memory:

- How do the ‘younger’ EU states feel about a financial crisis they have to suffer at no fault of their own? How will their relationships to the established members, which are responsible for the crisis, change?

- Are the concepts of capitalism and market economy, the principal goals of the post-communist states after 1989, now changing, in view of the current financial crisis? Is there a third way?
- Politics as a place of remembering: differences, parallels, and dialectics of forgetting in Europe since 2007, 2004 and 1989 respectively? Does the past play a role in current EU discourse, e.g. the European Council, the European Court of Justice? What are the grounds of nostalgia about the Eastern bloc?
- Specific political interests underlying the forgetting of certain events and remembering of others? Interest groups? Can we speak of an emerging EU ideology?
- Forgetting as possibility, as chance, as remedy, as theft of identity, as renewed violation or political dictate?
- Russia's *guided democracy* (*upravlaemaia demokratsia*): cultural or political opposition to the EU or Russia's own path toward democracy?

A good intention does not always lead to good results

To legally define what *citoyens* – to speak with Rousseau – ought to remember – and if they don't one can put a lawsuit on them – will result, at the end of the day, in *state paternalism* which is just a step away from the fully blown totalitarian state Europeans shook off in 1989. Administrators and politicians, who are no trained historians, will prescribe not only what memory is, but also the contents of our research. This will affect research budgets; only topics and issues that are of immediate interest and benefit to the ruling government will receive funding. Everything else will become *l'art pour l'art*, an intellectual luxury the state cannot afford. Politicians will tell the populace what it is allowed to remember and, equally important, what not. I fully understand and support the considerations of the German post war government that made the *Auschwitz denial* a legal offense in Germany. The Holocaust has been and still is being researched by international scholars and the Nuremberg trials have established the facts. But issuing laws, in the best intention of fostering and protecting humanity and condemning crimes against humanity, without the back up of historical commissions, is certainly a step in the wrong direction. By leaving out the experts, politicians will begin to implement their own perceptions and conceptions of what is good for society and what is not. There are, of course, universal moral values every person capable of thinking shares, such as equality, pluralism, the right to emigrate etc. Racism, fascism, sexism and totalitarianism are mostly things of the past, exactly because historians have researched, analysed and described them. One would not leave the management of a nuclear power plant to a five year old child – why then do politicians believe they are entitled to issue laws about

memory without historians' expert opinion? I therefore fully endorse the *option mechanism* suggested by the members of the *Appel de Blois*: No law about war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocides without an international tribunal.

Laws that condemn crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocides seem to express humanity; they make one feel nice and, above all, they certainly fit into the category of 'political correctness'. But historical research is not about being nice or politically correct; research in our understanding of analysis, facts and scholarly objectivity is about coming as close to the truth as possible – whether one likes the results or not. Is this 'political correctness' not an attempt to establish a binding system of values that is believed to function as a social glue overcoming the various identities a global society is characterized by these days? A nice intention that is born out of the wish to make society better, according to the values of individuality, pluralism, equality of citizens and respect for difference. Yet, while every society needs a certain amount of normative rules that determine how one should treat ones' co-citizens, I do not think that academic research requires such a *dictate of being nice*. On the contrary, historical research should enjoy full liberty, as limitations of that liberty will strike back like a boomerang: once one important sector of society is being told what to do and think, all others are not safe anymore. If we historians allow politicians and administrators to establish what memory is and what it is not, we have begun to turn into an *EU Dienst academia*, an academia that is in the service of the state, at its beck and call. Then, the way toward a EU ideology is free.

Once such an ideology is in effect, our hitherto free, pluralist and tolerant societies will begin to have an increasingly mistaken perception of their own: Identity is being constructed in the absence of historical facts and research. I can vividly remember how parts of the Swiss nation rejected the historical facts the Bergier commission had established in ten years of careful research. Nobody likes to think of oneself as having committed bad things. But again, history is not about being nice, but about detail, descriptions, the careful and balanced handling of facts, objectivity and, above all, looking to the past to learn from one's mistakes. Only liberty will grant future liberty and liberty in historical research will be the best guarantee for a free society.