

Opinion of Henri Brugmans on European federalism (September 1947)

Caption: In September 1947, in the Brussels journal Synthèses, Henri Brugmans, Dutch President of the Union of European Federalists (UEF), outlines the origins of the federalist doctrine and its implications for European reconstruction.

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The present state of European federalism

by Henri Brugmans

One of my great Dutch compatriots, the historian Johan Huizinga, who died during the war, left us a major book entitled *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. His French colleague Paul Hazard, who resembles him in so many ways, studied the 18th century and distilled his thinking into another masterpiece called *La Crise de la conscience européenne* [*The European Mind. The Critical Years*].

I have been pondering these two titles.

It is true that great epochs, or rather the social and spiritual structures which characterise them, die. It is also true that autumn storms buffet an anxious human race, during the periods which (with such naive optimism) people used to call periods 'of transition'. And it is true that the consciousness of human communities goes through crises of doubt and upheaval.

I open Huizinga's imposing tome. The first and perhaps finest chapter is headed: *The Violence of Life*. We see the silhouettes of the great *condottieri* of the 15th century, but also the terrors which used to strike ordinary people: famines, epidemics, wars, the dance of death. So much cruelty, superstition, fanaticism and despair! How similar it all is to us today, alas! And yet no, it was not the end of all culture. The end of one world, perhaps, but at the same time the coming of a new one. A Europe hacked to pieces, wretched, confused and demoralised — a Europe where civil wars grafted themselves onto international wars ... this was, however, the continent which was to give birth to the great generations of the Renaissance.

In Paul Hazard's book, the atmosphere is much less storm-tossed. The Revolution still seemed far off, although Saint-Simon sensed it coming and men such as Bayle and Fontenelle were already preparing the ground for it in the intellectual sphere. But perhaps the crisis was even deeper, spiritually, than that of the 15th century — more 'existential', to use a fashionable term for which I beg your pardon; for it paved the way for a moral disintegration after which there would be absolutely nothing left — nothing but the complete isolation of the individual, nothing but the coming of the spineless masses, nothing but collective organisations with no spiritual authority, opening the door to both anarchy and dictatorship. While the people who, whether they knew it or not, were the precursors of the Reformation undermined Christian unity, the 'philosophers' of the Age of Enlightenment undermined Christianity itself, the Christian achievement in its very essence. And what was the new gospel that they were drafting?

We have now reached the end of the cycle. After so many 'autumns', so many collective 'crises of conscience', everything seems to be falling apart and everything has become open to question. Only conservative utopians still expect a 'restoration', a 'new classicism'. Anyone who promises a 'return to normality' is either completely devoid of imagination or is an incorrigible dreamer. For our contemporaries, in fact, the word 'normal' has lost all meaning. From every Christian pulpit, priests and pastors have talked of the atom bomb in apocalyptic terms, but that has not had the effect either of solving the problem or, so far as I know, of bringing the dechristianised masses back to a more fervent state of devotion. The omnipresent threat of a catastrophe which can happen at any time has not even stopped the traditionally Christian masses abandoning Christianity.

Wherever we look, the sickness is there. The symptoms are everywhere. These days, everything, in at least one way, is symptomatic of the crisis. Chamberlain's umbrella was just as much a symbol of the decay as Hitler's rages, the powerlessness of all Europe's political parties just as much as the Petkov or Maniu trials. Crime or complicity, barbarianism or weakness, cynicism or battles of words: these, among so much else, are a few aspects of one and the same 'crisis of the European conscience'.

There are some of us, quite a few, a great many perhaps, who are not giving up. But where are we to start operating on the patient?

It all comes down to education, some say, and in a sense they are certainly right. Others take that idea

further and declare that the real solution is to be found in the human heart, which needs to be 'morally rearmed'. They are by no means wrong.

But are not the 'institutionalists' right, too, when they say that individualistic methods no longer work, and that it is pointless expecting any purification of individuals in a society which is itself profoundly impure?

If only the 'institutionalists' agreed with each other! If only they knew which 'institutions' we should be starting with! Suppose a 'social and political revolution' is a vital necessity, does it not need an effective strategy? Most of all, does it not need someone to run it, in other words, people, and does that not bring us back to the problem of people, full stop?

I myself think that, as always, we should proceed by the Cartesian method and dissect the problem. So let us apply the lessons that we learnt at school and start by splitting our subject into three parts:

Firstly, are there any solutions for Europe to be found outside Europe? If there are, it is a sad day for us, but all we have to do is submit to the law of survival of the fittest, the law laid down by whoever has more divisions than we do, greater economic potential, more of a future in the world and, hence, firmer faith.

Secondly, supposing there still are, theoretically, European solutions to Europe's problems, do we still have enough 'human material' to draw them up and put them into effect in the real world?

Thirdly, if we do still have some prospect of rallying Europe's forces around a specific programme, at what point in the battle can we fight to maximum effect?

Let us start by looking at the first question.

Is it true that Europe can be saved from outside, by applying the Russian or the American cure?

The United States is undoubtedly much younger than we are and looks at us with a kind of pity and a degree of contempt which is all too easily explained. To their way of thinking, there is no social problem, there are just social problems, and the characteristic feature of a problem is that, as far as they are concerned, it is an eminently practical matter which has a solution. They accuse us of being sentimental, of being 'philosophers' and of searching for difficulties where there are none. They do not torment themselves the way we do.

Their strength, however, is also their weakness. They can give us not only their dollars but also their spirit of initiative, their *dash*, their lack of social prejudice, their horror of ideological complications. But they will not help us escape our spiritual crisis. They suffer from it themselves, and the reason why they are still only rarely aware of it is that they are still trying to sidestep it.

The Russians are trying just as hard, actually. Having discovered an amazing solution to their own problems, they brush aside anything that does not fit into their frame of reference. They have not overcome the crisis either, they have 'liquidated' it, or, to be more precise, they have liquidated those who might have reminded them of its existence. When they talk about the West, it is with misunderstanding, but they are on the right track. You need only read an 'official' article in the Soviet press on existentialism or Picasso and Matisse to see how true this is. The messianic Slavophilia which triumphs in the Soviet Union includes a complete contempt for the 'rotteness of the West'; despising the patient is not the key to finding the cure for his illness.

So Europe will have 'to build itself', not, in all probability, as a spiritually and politically self-sufficient society, but, in the end, by relying only on itself. Can it do this? Does it still have enough strength?

It has certainly been appallingly weakened by the wholesale slaughters it has suffered. Entire generations have been sacrificed and, curiously, seem to be missing even in countries which, militarily speaking, took no part in the last two wars. All over Europe, there is a shortage of men in their 40s, old men still occupy an

alarming number of key positions and young people are actively uninterested in public affairs.

What hope is left?

Is it because I am stubborn that I still hope? Not entirely. I myself am quite convinced that the so-called 'cynicism' of the young has mainly to do with an instinctive perceptiveness which makes them deeply suspicious of national politics. They feel, with good reason, that the traditionalists have turned into reactionaries, that the overt revolutionaries are demagogues, and that neither of them has any valid solutions to offer — worse still, that they do not even set the problems in their proper context.

Young people suspect that the vital issues which affect their future have very little to do with the parliamentary debates in which they are expected to take an interest. They know that today's political battles are not being fought for them, but that people would like them to fight the battles for others. They refuse to get involved; they go off and have fun. But the day someone explains to them that the battle for freedom, human diversity, well-being and security is going to be an international battle, they will know, when that day comes, that at least people have decided to talk in specifics, about their own future. 'An illusion,' did you say? My answer to you is that you are wrong and that it will not be long before you realise it. The whole point is whether we can put our plan of action into practical form before it is too late.

It is not, of course, enough to say that any national solution is doomed to failure on principle and that it might well even exacerbate our nationalist disease. We still have to identify the Bastilles we propose to take by storm. We have to trigger the avalanche and say what practical means we will have to use to break down, as soon as possible, the political frontiers which split Europe into pieces and not only fail to protect its diversity but actually tear it apart.

Every age has its special mission. During the 'autumn of the Middle Ages', out of the struggles between the Armagnacs and the Burgundians, Lancaster and York, new units sprang into being. They were essential to the development of mankind. Similarly, today, the chaotic feudalism of our nation-states has become an anachronism and a gaping sore. We need larger units: regional units for some problems, global units for others. To secure the supplies it needs and to control the atomic energy it has released, the human race must unite from pole to pole. As we focus ourselves on these mammoth tasks, however, Europe cannot stand to one side or be a passive onlooker. It will either federate or it will perish, and I use the word 'perish' here in its most exact sense.

Just as there was no baronial castle that could not be taken by cannon fire, there can be no effective national system of defence in the face of all-out, technological war. Just as economies on a cantonal or provincial scale ceased to exist in the capitalist, machine age, the spectre of national interventionism becomes a nightmare when we are faced with all-embracing economic solidarity among all people. Woe to those so-called 'liberals' who try to find a place for personal initiative somewhere other than in an organised world. And woe to the socialists among us if they go on thinking that the nation-state is the same thing as the community and the common good. In this historic situation, what is federalism? A slogan, a method, a prospect, at a time when mankind is degenerating for lack of proper social institutions. It is the problem of economic and political transformation situated, at last, at the level where it is solvable: the functional level, the specific international level.

That is why the vanguard of European federalism consists of patriots who want to save the nation from nationalism, the community from dictatorship and freedom from anarchy. They know they are bringing Europe a non-doctrinaire doctrine, flexibility without opportunism, a spirit of loyalty and revolution. Ready-made solutions disgust them, knowing, as they do, that every problem has its specifics and a particular framework in which the solution to it can be found. In every area, however, they take their lead from a single principle, one which has been expressed by the Catholic Church and by a great many socialists. This principle is that any human solidarity which manifests itself as a tangible need must be given an institutional, organic, independent form. This was national solidarity, when feudalism needed to be destroyed. It was workers' solidarity, when the emancipation of the proletariat was the main driving force behind all progress. It is European and world solidarity today, when the need is to avoid war and establish a

rational system of organisation for the world's riches.

That is why Europe's federalists consider themselves to be in the front line of the battle and believe that they are opening a breach at the very place where it may still be possible. That is why they can offer their solutions equally well both to the trade unions and to the class which manages economic and social life in our countries, to those with responsibility for young people and to the Churches, with their feel for all the anxieties of the present day. They are mostly still unknown and their organisations have only just been set up, but they may be the only ones who know that time is on their side, if it is on anyone's.

European federalism, as a force with popular support, was born during the war, in the Resistance. We discovered that patriotism is an international feeling and that it defends a human inheritance rather than a state bristling with frontiers. We fought inside 'fortress Europe', but Hitler's expression 'living space' remained in our memories because we had the very clear sensation that we were suffocating in the narrow national setting. If there is any context in which the spiritual and political inheritance of the Resistance has not been lost, it is that of federalism.

We met after the war, on the basis of the declarations made before the fall of Germany, in Geneva in particular, by members of the Resistance who had given some thought to the future. Let me quickly list the stages by which this movement came into being.

In September 1946, in Hertenstein, Switzerland, there was a small conference of activists who did not know each other, who did not yet represent very much, but who concluded their discussions with a political declaration and a public meeting at the Grütli.

There was another meeting, in Luxembourg, in October 1946. This time, the English-speaking influence predominated and nudged those present towards world federalism. As at Hertenstein, a declaration was published and the beginnings of an organisation were set up.

In December 1946, in Basel and Paris, the proponents of Europe decided to merge into a single movement, the Union of European Federalists, which was to work together closely with the World Movement for World Federal Government, which was set up alongside it.

In April 1947, in Amsterdam, an 'enlarged central committee' met before a small congress at which the UEF affirmed its vitality. The practical results were still comparatively meagre, but the enterprise stayed afloat. In other words, it was to live on.

In Montreux, in August 1947, European federalists, meeting in a congress, adopted statutes and a doctrine. The congress spoke out on Germany, on the economic structure for the future, on its attitude to the World Movement, on the proposed Marshall Plan and the countries of eastern Europe. The establishment, not long before, of a committee to liaise with groups moving in the same direction (Churchill, van Zeeland, Coudenhove-Kalergi) was endorsed. The UEF now comprised 37 affiliated movements.

That is how things stand as I write. They will not stay as they are, of course. As Mr Grégoire Gafenco recently wrote in the *Journal de Genève*: 'Federalism is an idea, it has to become a policy'. This is absolutely true, and we will be judged on what we do about it. Now that we have put together an apparently solid nucleus, we cannot afford to disappoint those to whom we gave hope in the past. We must advance quickly if we want to avoid failure. The only consideration that should restrain us from acting boldly is caution, and then it must be to save us from being blinded in our boldness. But is the fact that the word 'boldness' has been applied to us so often already not a sign of great promise, in the midst of a worn-out, sceptical and resigned Europe?

Well, of course, I am perfectly well aware of the limits of what federalist action can achieve. Even if it succeeds, it will not be a cure for all the ills of the human race. But the future would be very dark if we were to fail. The reasons for the 'crisis of the European conscience' are certainly too deep seated to be overcome by the convening of a federal assembly for Europe. But if the revolution we so badly need does not come to

pass, if our peoples continue to suffocate in a compartmentalisation of nations where the air is becoming more and more unbreathable, then there can simply be no question of any recovery. No European nation can save itself any longer; even Britain is still at risk, despite the tightening of its links with the Dominions; as for the others, I do not think I am succumbing to facile demagoguery, or even oversimplification, when I say that, where they are concerned, there is no real hope left except in a federation.

Some countries have already set out on that path. As a Dutchman, let me point to 'Benelux' with particular satisfaction. If that experiment has proved anything, it is that you have to go the whole distance if you go anywhere at all: customs union must lead to economic union or else the whole thing fails, and in our day economic issues are inseparable from politics, full stop. We are not, under any circumstances, entitled to think that, following the proposal for the Marshall Plan, European cooperation has become the official policy of our governments and that public opinion should therefore be entitled to lose interest in it. Without enlightened understanding, without passionate backing from our peoples, nothing lasting can be achieved in the times we live in. If they do not want to flounder in their petty quarrels and in discussions whose vehemence is matched only by their practical irrelevance, they must unite and find their way to a common discipline, in the defence of their freedom.

All this so that Europe can, at last, emerge from its prehistory.