

Lecture given by Denis de Rougemont on the cultural implications of European unity (Paris, 22 April 1948)

Caption: On 22 April 1948, Denis de Rougemont gives a lecture at the Sorbonne on the cultural implications of European unity. He refers, in particular, to the opposition between the unionist and federalist tendencies within the pro-European activist movement.

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The adventure of the 20th century

I have not come here this evening to talk to you about a utopia; no, I am here to talk to you about an adventure to which we are now well and truly committed: the federating of Europe.

There is the utopia of Europe, and there is the adventure of Europe. As you will see, this fundamental distinction reflects two attitudes between which we are going to have to choose, within a time which, given the state of the world, is going to be short.

The general weakness of utopias is that they actually have less of a future before them than the present. I would go so far as saying, without being too paradoxical, that *a utopia can generally be defined as a system without a future*.

The greatest historian of our day, Arnold Toynbee, observes that traditional utopias are actually — and I quote — ‘programmes of action masquerading in the disguise of imaginary descriptive sociology’. The action they propose, however, is simply *the ‘pegging’, at a certain level, of an actual society which has entered on a decline*. Utopians isolate from such a society those features which they regard as good, and make out of them a system which is claimed to be in permanent equilibrium, safe from crude threats such as creations of the human imagination, insensitive to the constantly renewed challenges of an ever-changing reality — in other words, outside the stream of history.

The slogan of fear, ‘The defence of Europe’, defines today’s utopia.

Europe as it is, pessimistic and divided, encumbered with borders which prevent it from breathing, threatened at every moment with a kind of hemiplegia, whether because the Left succeeds in paralysing the Right or vice versa, is in practical terms impossible to defend. Let me explain what I mean.

To try to unite our nation-states, as they are, in a defensive alliance, to try to combine the sovereignty of each of them in a coalition to fight against the empires, would be seeking to set up a coalition of the very factors which are the principal reasons for our decline. A holy alliance of our bacteria does not seem to me like the way of rescuing our health. A holy alliance of the sovereignties that we are dying of would not restore us to life either. Our frontiers and our customs barriers are enough to stop our goods from circulating, but they will not stop armies. That is why I say that wanting a union of Europe without making any changes to its economic and political structures is, practically speaking, to want nothing — it is a utopia.

On the other hand, transforming Europe along the lines dictated by its special genius, which is freedom, and in 20th-century conditions (organisation); reminding Europe, which feels diminished, that it still has nearly 300 million inhabitants, the hardest-working and most inventive people in the whole world (purely in terms of numbers, more than Russia and twice as many as the United States); organising it beyond the level of its states into a great political unit and a huge economic area — federating it in all its diversity so as to sustain and give lustre to a certain notion of humans and the risks humans take — risks to which Europe, however often it has been untrue to them, is still the great witness in the eyes of the whole world – this is the task to which we have committed ourselves, this is the adventure of the 20th century, this is the calling of this generation.

You have probably noticed that, for several weeks, or several months, the idea of European union has made amazing progress, if not in practice then at least in the pronouncements of our leaders and of the press. Some of you, I imagine, think that the union is going ahead smoothly and that, consequently, our agitation about federalism is superfluous.

I myself continue to think that our governments are still working towards the utopia that I have just described, and that if the real adventure is to happen it will be up to us.

In Montreux last September, at the Congress of the Union of European Federalists, I said:

‘If Europe is to last, the credit for it will go to the federalists and no one else. Who else can it rely on?’

‘It must not rely on the people in government. The union, the peace which most of them want cannot, for absurd but technical reasons, be left to them. So they need to be given a prod in the back, that is for certain.’

A few months later, speaking for the governments and describing the difficult position they were in, the Belgian Prime Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, cried out in the middle of a famous speech: ‘Hustle us!’

We agree.

It is now up to Europe’s people, to public opinion as it wakes from its sleep, to the citizens of this continent, to speak. They will have their say in a fortnight from now, at the Congress of Europe, which is due to be held in The Hague on 7 May.

I cannot predict what resolutions will result from the Congress of Europe. On 19 June 1789, no one could foresee the oath taken at the Jeu de Paume, which was a turning point in history from that day on. What I do know about is our determination, and that is the specific target we all aim to hit, sooner or later.

What we have today is a Europe divided, partitioned and in a state of anarchy. We desire an organised Europe. A Europe without barriers or visas, throughout whose area the free movement of persons, ideas and goods is restored. To secure these organised freedoms, there will have to be certain institutions. Over and above our states, as a matter of the greatest urgency, we desire a Political Council of Europe. We want this Council to be under the supervision of a Parliament for Europe. We desire an Economic Council to see to the pooling of our natural resources. And we desire a Centre for Culture to give the European consciousness a voice and authority.

Above all this, dominating these Councils, which would themselves predominate over the states, we want to set up a Supreme Court to be the guardian of the rights and duties of individuals, and to which citizens, groups and minorities can directly appeal against any state or party which threatens these. This will guarantee the right of opposition, without which all talk of democracy is farcical.

Lastly, we want Europe because without it the world is sliding towards war, and the only option we have left now is to prevent that war or to perish in it. Separated and isolated, none of our countries can prevent anything; we will be colonised one after the other, for all our national sovereignty; perhaps you understand what I am thinking about. If we have a federation, on the other hand, we will be as strong as the two Great Powers. They will climb down and we can start talking.

That is the guiding vision behind the adventure we have embarked on. Clearly, what is at stake is not, in the first instance, our security, or our prosperity, although both these things depend on it. What is at stake, more than anything else, is mankind itself; the opportunities we face in the 20th century. That is why the hierarchy of Councils that we are proposing culminates in the Supreme Court; an institution whose purpose is not to hold power or to have the police uphold a particular ideology, but, quite the opposite, to ensure the rule of law, by which I mean guaranteeing basic human rights, which come before the state and are above the state, and without which, for us Europeans, even happiness seems unacceptable.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will have realised that our adventure is something which goes far beyond the institutions required and whatever legal discussions we may hold about them.

Whatever party we belong to and whichever country we come from, we all sense that the threats facing Europe today are directed at something deeper than our economic systems or our political passions. They are threats to a particular way of living, an ideal and a climate of freedom that has been symbolised for centuries by the name of Europe. If we were to lose them, we could be sure that at the same time we would lose what, to our way of thinking, constitutes the value and the meaning of life. The whole world would be poorer for it.

So, in short, our real common good is a notion of humans and freedom. Our basic unity springs from that concept. And by defining it in up-to-date, specific terms, we will arrive at a valid definition of the basis and structures of the federation whose object is to safeguard it.

I know very well what some people are going to say to me.

People will say that I am getting lost in abstractions and idealising the down-to-earth reasons which militate for a union of Europe. They will say that the immediate reasons are economic and political, that only that counts, and that the people on the street couldn't care less about my European concept of humans and freedom.

In some people's eyes, this point of view passes for being realistic, but I would describe it as utopian. I say that it is tantamount to denying Europe in the form in which it has, nevertheless, existed.

If anyone claims that the only serious thing is to organise the continent economically and politically, my answer will be: in that case, be serious about it, become an American colony, or ask the Russians in to set up the kind of system which prevails in Warsaw. You will get war on top of everything else: that will rescue you from abstractions. But if there is any resistance, believe me, it will prove that Europeans, more than to good order, more than to money, and more than to the bread they eat, are attached to a concept of what it is to be human. They may not always know how to formulate it, but they are capable of dying for it, because that is what makes them live. They proved it during the Resistance.

I will then remind people that the reason why Europe, a little promontory on the edge of Asia, has, nevertheless, as you know, been the greatest source of energy, inventiveness and real power on the planet for more than 2000 years. By the exercise of the mind, through abstract thought and speculation followed by pioneering creativity, it has been able to offset the down-to-earth realities to which some would like to reduce it.

Europe is a culture, otherwise it is nothing much.

I use the word 'culture' here in the widest, most human sense, the sense, indeed, which has made our existence glorious in the eyes of the whole world.

For us, in Europe, genuine culture springs from an awareness of life. Cultivating ourselves, enjoying the fruits of culture and taking part in its creation means, first and foremost, for each one of us, expanding and deepening our concept of what it is to be human and free. And then it means organising and consequently transforming the setting we live in and our institutions. Lastly, and to sum everything up, it means, ceaselessly and almost without scruple, asking what things mean, and what life means.

It is typical of Europe today that culture here is still a goal, an end in itself and not a means to an end. Elsewhere, as you know, it is made to work for the development of industry and the achievement of certain political objectives. The leaders of the ruling parties, the people in charge of the economic plan, lay down a precise programme for it to follow and prescribe the — subordinate — role it is to play. For us Europeans, by contrast, it is culture which expresses the human meaning of political life and of the economy: culture sets out to exert an influence on them and allows us to criticise them, to assess their results. So the primacy of culture is part of the way that we define Europe.

Secondly, a no-less-typical feature of Europe is that its cultural unity, or to put it more accurately, its unity of attitude towards culture, feeds on diversity.

Expanding and deepening the concept of what it means to be human and free has never, in Europe, been the prerogative of a single doctrine, a nation or a chosen caste; on the contrary, it always has been and always will be, as long as there is a Europe, the outcome of an ongoing dialogue, very often dramatic in tone, sometimes tragic, between a number of doctrines or expressions of faith, some 20 or so nations, and an endless variety of schools of thought and individual geniuses. All of them have contributed to making

Europe what it is and helped to shape the European notion of what humans are.

That notion, then, is not simple, it is dialectical; it is not a finished but an open concept; it is, at all times, the end-product of pairs of clashing elements, the debate between which goes on without ceasing in each one of us and starts anew with each generation: the ancient Greek and Roman worlds and Christianity, church and state, Catholicism and Protestantism, regional loyalties and the sense of the universal, memory and invention, respect for tradition and passion for progress, science and wisdom, Germanicism and Latinity, individualism and collectivism, rights and duties, freedom and justice — the list goes on.

This tense equilibrium, forever threatened with breaking apart to the advantage of one or other of its components, is where we find the particular risk, the adventure, which confronts every European.

In this discussion, in which all of us are involved, whether we know it or not, lies the secret behind the dynamism of the West, that creative anxiety which drives Europeans, from century to century, to question their relationship with God, with the world, with the state and with the community.

In the infinitely variable combinations which can be produced using the contradictory elements that make up their inheritance, lies the opportunity that all Europeans possess for tailoring their judgements and way of living more and more to their individual tastes.

To conclude, it is in this constant act of making choices, in the awareness that they have of being responsible for them, that Europeans conceive their idea of freedom.

Our entire history is an illustration of this debate that is going on inside each one of us. It is the history of the risks that freedom raises, from the rocky shores of disorder to absolute order. The laws governing this progression are fairly simple. Individuals, misusing their rights and their freedom, once it has become easy to exercise, have only to succumb to the temptation to embrace anarchy or imperialism, and a collectivist reaction kicks in, in the name of justice or the social order. This spawns unitary (or, as they are now called, totalitarian) regimes, and in no time at all the genius of diversity, in other words freedom, rises up to confront them again, with renewed passion.

If we now try to identify what common notion of humans and their destiny explains why we simultaneously reject individualism and collectivism, we see a certain ideal taking shape; this only had a name put to it in the 20th century, but it has always been the axis around which our history has turned, the vision which has guided us in our revolutions: I mean the ideal of the human person.

This notion, Christian in origin but accepted and adopted by humanism, is the idea of humans as having a dual responsibility, to their own calling and to the polity that they live in, at the same time autonomous and interdependent, at the same time free and involved, and not just free as the individualist is free, or involved only as the totalitarian is involved — humans as the setting for a living synthesis but also a conflict between demands which are equally valid but, in fact or in law, antagonistic.

Such humans are true to themselves when they agree to join in the dialogue, play their part in the drama, and go beyond these by what they create: an act, a piece of work or an institution.

They become untrue to themselves and to the genius which shapes Europe when they yield to the temptation to suppress one of the terms of the conflict, either by trying to lock nation, party or ideology into its own specific circumstances, or when they set out to impose them on everyone in a uniform and therefore tyrannical manner.

With these last few words we have identified the main obstacles to immediate progress towards a European Federation.

To put it plainly, these are: opposition from Soviet Russia, nationalist prejudices, and the demands of political parties.

Even supposing that there were good reasons for including the Russians — Holy Russia or the Soviet Union — in a European federation, there is no question of doing this at the moment. Whether we like it or not, Dostoevsky or no Dostoevsky, we have to build Europe without Russia, without that electrified, standardised Byzantium, governed by Asiatics under the cover of a doctrine conceived in Europe in the powerful brain of a German, who intended it for the British. Does that mean that we are going to build a Europe against the Russians? That is unfortunately how they see it.

Any attempt to rescue Europe, meaning in practical terms to unite Europe, at once looks to them, without any further examination, like a manoeuvre directed against Russia.

They are right, in the sense that uniting Europe means putting it beyond the reach of grinding poverty and nationalistic anarchy and thereby, secondarily but very effectively, beyond the reach of Soviet expansion. They are wrong if they think for one moment that one of the goals of the federation is to make war with Russia. But is that what they think?

A year ago, in America, I was talking about these things to a man who it would be hard to suspect of hysterical anticommunism: Albert Einstein. He said to me: 'The nub of the matter is that the Soviets feel that they are the weakest partner in the world game. That makes them direct all their efforts, not surprisingly, towards thwarting every move we make, even when our motives are genuinely friendly. There is no power on earth that can persuade them that our intentions are not hostile to them. The only way out of this deadlock is to organise the world without them, and you will see that, without them, it will be easy. Once that is done, they are not stupid: they will realise that it is no longer in their interest to stay out.'

I would be tempted to share that optimism, but it is something for the long term. For the moment, if we look at the facts, the situation is as follows: while the Soviet side accuses us of preparing to set up a western bloc — and blocs, they tell us, have no purpose except war — they have set up their eastern bloc, but we have not created our federation. The attitude is the same when it comes to the Marshall Plan, or to any congress of intellectuals. They are duly invited, but the Russians respond by drawing the Iron Curtain with a great show of fuss, locking themselves in and shouting that we are stopping them coming in, that we are shutting them out; that we are forming up in a bloc against them, and so on.

There must be some sort of misunderstanding. There generally is misunderstanding between people who are afraid of each other. And fear rouses spectres which are then much more frightening than creatures of flesh and blood. That is why the only possible cure for the serious fear which a spectral western bloc inspires in the Russians is to set up our western federation very rapidly and on solid foundations. The serious issue, as far as we are concerned, is not to refute the charge of warmongering, but to prevent war actually breaking out.

The finest evidence of the anarchy of language which characterises our times will certainly always be, in the eyes of historians, the simultaneous use of certain expressions such as democracy, the right of peoples to self-determination, the will of the people, anti-fascism, freedom of the press, unanimous opinion, and so on, by totalitarians of different shades as well as by liberals in the West. It is worth remembering what Bernard Shaw said about England and America: that they were 'two countries separated by a common language.'

Nor is it any longer a question of declaring that we are democrats, but of actually setting up certain institutions which will guarantee real freedoms. We do not much care about questions of etiquette, and too bad for the word 'democracy': when we hear it on the lips of Stalinists, we should tremble for it, because they have sharp teeth! Let us leave the word to them if they are so attached to it. So long as they leave us the thing itself, we will be happy.

All the same, opposition from the Russians is not just confined to distorting the meaning of words that they have taken from us and showering us with Homeric insults. It takes a serious form: at the Hague Congress, the seats reserved for our federalist friends from the whole of eastern Europe will be empty.

And people have not been slow to take that as a pretext for defeatist arguments. They say: is it worth building Europe without them? The answer is: the absence of our partners from the East obliges us to build Europe much more quickly and much more resolutely than if they were there.

To start with, note that Russia's satellites did not choose to leave our camp. Their people are no more Soviet-minded than we are. Less so, if we look at the percentages among them who voted communist. There again, the qualifier 'people's', which they have used to adorn their republics, is a specious turn of phrase. Let us be clear that those regimes are people's republics in the same sense that the Jewish laws under Vichy were Jewish, or that prisons for children are childish. 'People's' republics, indeed, for anyone who calls black white or considers Stalin a true democrat.

Another thing that people are going to ask is how can it be that all of those people, democrats most of them, surrendered one after the other to the dictates of a minority. My answer is that they actually succumbed to the attraction of a great power.

The other day, Mauno Pekkala, the Prime Minister of Finland, gave the following candid explanation of the reasons for the treaty he had just signed with the Russians:

'With the way modern technology is developing,' he said, 'small nations cannot organise their means of defence on their own. They have to secure the assistance of the great power, whichever it is, whose interests are served by granting it.'

The fact is that the only place that the so-called 'people's' republics, just like Finland, could find that power until now was in the East. In the West, what had we to offer? The divisions between us; our various forms of economic experience, half-heartedly embarked on and poorly sustained, constricted within their national settings; a general scepticism as regards democratic values; the lack of any doctrine, of any fresh momentum, of any uniting principle, any hope or any spirit of adventure.

I say, then, that building Europe without the eastern half, far from being a solution adopted out of a sense of resignation, is the only way that we have today of not abandoning those people to their fate, of creating the pole of attraction that they need in order to find their balance, and to restore that power for which they secretly hope but of which we have thwarted them through our disunity and our shortcomings.

For them at least as much as for us, it is vital that the Hague Congress should light a beacon which can be seen from a long way off.

As you have just seen, the real obstacles to a federation of Europe are not primarily in the East; they are here among us.

It all comes back to our internal problems, especially the two burning issues that I referred to a short while ago: the problem which nationalist prejudice causes us, and, parallel to that, the problem of partisan spirit.

I think I really must make clear here that there is a fundamental distinction to be made as regards the whole vocabulary of federalism, with decisive knock-on effects for all of our work on building Europe. In the case of nations as well as parties, we must, as a matter of urgency, learn to distinguish between diversity and division; we must learn to see, and feel, that the real stand-off is not between union and diversity, quite the opposite; but that the divisions among us mean, in practical terms, the imminent demise of our diversity.

Let us look at the case of the nation first:

The diversity of our nations, reflecting the geographical partitioning of our continent, has for centuries given Europe its special character and made its culture fertile. One of the aims of the federation is to preserve that.

But as a consequence of the collusion between nation and state, setting the same rigid frontiers around cultural, linguistic, economic and administrative realities which have no reason to overlap in reality, this

natural diversity has become an arbitrary division. It impoverishes our cultural exchanges. It leaves each of our countries incapable of safeguarding its political autonomy or existing as an economic entity. This national individualism, which necessarily tends towards self-sufficiency, is the most serious danger to the real life of our nations today. It leaves them weak and will inevitably hand them over to unification by force, either through interference by an empire from outside or through usurpation by a party from within.

That is why a federal union, a union of peoples over the heads of states, seems to us to be the only guarantee of national independence. Only by overcoming what divides us can we safeguard our diversity.

That rule also applies to our doctrines, parties and ideologies.

These kinds of diversity, as vital to a flourishing cultural life and freedom as our nations are, have a tendency to turn into fatal divisions. While the borders between states partition Europe vertically, ideologies and parties partition it horizontally. They lead in the direction of intellectual self-sufficiency, just as nations tend towards economic self-sufficiency. Their insidious claims to exclusive rights in relation to organising the continent are just as dangerous, just as utopian, as imperialism by a single nation would be.

It is quite obvious that neither the Right nor the Left is capable of bringing about a union at the present time.

None of these parties is capable, on its own, of saving Europe or, consequently, of safeguarding its own future. Just as nations have no prospect of surviving unless they drop the tyrannical dogma of their own absolute sovereignty while there is still time, parties have no prospect of continuing their struggle unless they scale down their ambitions, abandon any — even unwitting — totalitarian aims, and make their tactics fit in with the general strategy of action for European public welfare.

On this subject, and without, I think, straying outside the remit of this talk, I would like to take the opportunity to talk about something which I think needs to be clarified.

People have said and written, in Europe, that the British Labour Party has been boycotting the Hague Congress. And a few socialists on the Continent, followed by a number of people outside the parties, have declared that Labour's absence would give the Congress a political complexion which would prevent their taking part. I am glad to be able to tell you that this is not the case, and that Labour members will be coming.

It is true that the congress of socialist parties, held in London recently, spoke out against 'official' participation by its members in the Hague Congress. But the fact is that the organisers of the Hague meeting have never asked any party to send an official delegation. And the fact is that, despite the Socialists' refusal to give something that no one had ever asked them for, they will be coming to The Hague in their personal capacity, in other words on the same footing as everyone else. The House of Commons will therefore be sending us more than 50 of its Members, including some 30 Labour Members, and among them the leaders of the left and right wings of the party.

Only yesterday, Mr Léon Blum, writing in *Le Populaire*, said: 'So they won't be setting up the United States of Europe without us. We, in exchange, won't be entertaining the "absurd and deplorable" presumption that we can set it up today by ourselves.'

That is certainly clear.

But I have to add this: the parties must not just agree on a compromise when it comes to setting up Europe. The basis for agreement must be a determination by each of them to carry their own particular aspirations through. And the same goes for the nations.

Take the Socialists: what do they want? To raise living standards for the masses, organise production to bring that about, and thereby create conditions for more genuine social justice. Well, that all presupposes, entails, nay, requires, the Federation of Europe. A Socialist who, as a Socialist, is not in favour of the Federation may be sincere and someone meriting our respect, but it would be hard to see that person as

particularly logical or realistic.

How about the Conservatives? Conserving what is worth conserving in all our European traditions presupposes, entails, nay, compels the union of Europe. A Conservative who, out of a spirit of nationalism, would refuse to allow their nation the right to join a federation, in other words to preserve its real autonomy at the cost of giving up a sovereignty which no longer actually exists, would be guilty of falsifying the title of Conservative.

And as for the Liberals, although they are clearly not a major political party in Europe any more, their chief ambition is still actually that of the huge majority of Europe's citizens, supposing it is true that the word 'liberal' denotes a friend of freedom, not just of the free market. If that is so, it will, I am quite sure, recover all its old splendour in the time to come.

The three main reasons why we should unite — security, prosperity and freedom — all depend on each other. On them, in a positive sense, depends joint action by the three parties which mainly lay claim to them.

Everyone can, therefore, move forward in the name of their own principles, provided only that they take them seriously.

Later, once the goal has been reached and the federation has been consolidated, there will no longer be anything to stop them indulging in their favourite pastime of fighting with each other at least as much as fighting for their ideals. What is very clear is that, if they fail to set up the federation, they will inevitably, thereafter, lose one of the rights dearest to them: the freedom to argue with each other, the right to quarrel ...

Ladies and gentlemen, if Europe, the mother of nations and parties, does not devise ways of overcoming nationalism and the partisan spirit, I cannot see who in the world could do it with any prospect of success. We have developed viruses for which only we can manufacture effective antitoxins.

Somewhere in the space between free-market capitalism and absolute state control, two systems spawned in Europe then emigrated to virgin territories where the excesses they lead to are patent and threatening. Because the conflict between them looks to be never-ending, Europe owes it to the world to inaugurate the third way, the path of organised freedoms.

At the present time we are living through the 'phoney peace'. It is up to us to make sure it ends soon in a lightning peace, an effect which only the solemn proclamation of a European Federation can produce.

There is something going on in the east. It is time something happened in Europe! It is time to rouse the hopes of the separated half of the continent. It is also time to give our American friends the certainty that we are not what they have at times almost been entitled to think we are: people who have given up on history.

The real third force on the world stage is not any old selection of double negatives and half-measures, it is Europe rejoining the 20th century, in order to take the lead and invent the future. It is federalism, which wants our promised land not to be America or Russia but this old land in need of being made young again, of being freed from its partitions, this Europe we have to win back — for all its peoples, for all its parties, and, as its true genius requires, for all mankind.