

'Lights and shadows at Interlaken' from Common Cause (6 September 1948)

Caption: On 6 September 1948, in an article published in the American journal Common Cause, the Italian Socialist MP Piero Calamandrei describes the issues surrounding the second Congress of the European Parliamentary Union (EPU) that has just come to a close in Interlaken.

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Light and shadows at Interlaken

PIERO CALAMANDREI

"Either union or death!" . . . With this funereal knell ended the opening address at Interlaken, delivered by Leon Maccas, delegate from Athens. Everyone applauded, but no one seemed visibly disturbed by the desperate urgency of the dilemma; no one gave evidence of being aware that here, in this second congress of the European Parliamentary Union, we were like a gathering of physicians in consultation (ignorant and powerless, as consultations of doctors practically always are), convened at the last hour at the bedside of a Europe which seemed, from certain symptoms, in its final agony.

But the Swiss countryside is too agreeable, too consoling, to admit freely at its frontier so unwelcome a guest as the brutal anguish which has been let loose on the rest of the world. In this vacation oasis for the rich, visitors here can dispense with apprehensions about the future, since all has been prearranged to make life comfortable and appease destiny. On the broad and neat avenues, amid carefully tended meadows and orderly gardens through which peeps, exactly as in illustrated travel brochures, the curve of a lake or a snowy mountain peak, there flows a placid stream of expensive automobiles, as large as matrimonial beds; the smiling occupants look complacent and mild, since they feel no shame in being ostentatious about their wealth when the footpaths alongside do not present, by way of contrast, any unfortunate rebuke from beggars. Even the pedestrians seem all on the point of going for a holiday: as they pass by, bare-legged and shouldering an alpine sack, one would think they were all setting out for an excursion into the country. Here if the stout *monsieur* has the desire to traverse the city stretched out on a pillow, he can do so on board a little boat which glides silently from lake to lake; in fact he can scale glaciers 12,000 feet high without leaving the plush seats of the alpine railway. Even the clocks, those instruments of torture invented to remind mortals of their coming damnation, become, in the flag-bedecked shopwindows, little toys to amuse with surprising carillons and mechanical dolls.

In the setting where the sessions of the congress were held, this air of an expensive vacation prevailed. Let us pretend not to be aware that in the *salle* adjoining there is another crowd around a table, a crowd which prefers to federalism the game of roulette; let us enter, we federalists, the great hall reserved for our congress.

The entire hall is filled with the seats for the delegations, and, at an angle, tables for the press; outside observers, few in number and virtually all masculine, are gathered in the balcony in the rear, where hang one beside the other, like pieces of tapestry, the flags of all the states of Europe. (But the red one with the hammer and sickle is not there.)

If anyone came to this congress with the romantic idea of entering an atmosphere burning with fraternal embraces, he was disappointed: after the inaugural session work went ahead peacefully in the rhythm of routine administrative toil. The delegations sat, each in its own place, without mingling; discussion was slow and without apparent polemical encounters, since it was delayed virtually at every phrase by the monotonous voice of the interpreter. The official languages were French and English; languages also permitted were Italian and German; and it is not always easy, in this alternation of different tongues, interspersed with the translations which neutralized the tensions, to follow the dialectical thread of the arguments; but after some hours of orientation one begins to discern, behind the appearance of monotonous harmony, the trends and the *sous-entendus*, the alliances and the rivalries. Vague and generic federalist enthusiasm becomes precise in terms of practical interests. There follows something which resembles the reduction to prose of a piece of poetry: the enchantment disappears, the grammatical constructions stand out, and the logical sutures which reveal the links and the hidden hierarchies of thought behind phraseology. So it happened here; beneath this common aspiration for European unity, whose sentimental summons we all felt, each delegation showed little by little its national preferences and its national fears: the demands of its domestic politics, even governmental and electoral anxieties.

And this which might seem to be disappointing was, in reality, I believe, the real novelty and the real usefulness of the Interlaken congress. Here was begun the work of translating the idealistic poetry of

European federalism into the prose of political practice; it was a passage from the heroic era of propaganda which soars on high, conquering terrestrial obstacles by fantasy, to the lowly terrain of political realities.

The Interlaken congress was not a general gathering of all the European federalist movements, as was the conference which took place at the Hague in May, 1948, and which was called the "Congress of Europe"; at Interlaken there assembled only the representatives of one of these movements, the "European Parliamentary Union," which was created at Gstaad in September of 1947, on the initiative of Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, general secretary of the Union, who has been for twenty-five years a tireless promoter of this great idea of the United States of Europe. The distinctive nature of the European Parliamentary Union, setting it apart from all the other federalist movements, is what is expressed in its title: the fact that it is an association not of private citizens but of parliamentary members, i.e., of deputies or senators in parliaments which have been freely elected in European states having a democratic government. This political qualification does not give the deputies who have joined the Union any deliberative powers, since they joined in a private capacity and are not invested officially with the right to represent, for the specific purposes of this congress, the organs of which they are members; nevertheless, the fact that in each of these parliaments there has been formed a group of federalists who belong to the European Parliamentary Union, gives this Union a political importance superior to that of any other of the federalist movements: it has a direct channel of communication with the various European parliaments, and can bring the question of European union—heretofore merely the object of platonic votes in conferences—directly on the floor of the parliamentary assemblies which are invested with deliberative powers.

It has been correctly said that the European Parliamentary Union, while it is not yet the constituent assembly of European federation, may be, in a certain sense, its ante-chamber. Already, from the constellation of parliamentary groups which belong to it, one can get an idea of what, at least in the beginning, the territorial and political shape of the United States of Europe might be: a grouping founded apparently on a geographical criterion (the states of Western Europe), but in reality not without reference to a tacit political criterion. The political criterion was revealed when, during the first session, representatives not only from Western Germany but even from Turkey (hardly a part of Western Europe) were admitted by acclamation with an enthusiasm which easily overcame all juridical objections. This political criterion was confirmed again in the opposite sense, during the last session, by the inexorable stiffening of juridical arguments which refused admission (against the vote of the Italian delegation) to the representatives of the westernmost nation of Europe, namely the republican deputies of the Spanish parliament in exile.

On the agenda of this conference, along with discussion about the internal organization of the Union, there were two fundamental topics, which absorbed a large part of the four days in session: "the convocation and organization of the European assembly" and "the principles of a European constitution."

Of these two topics, the one which was truly important because of its actuality was the first; and around it long discussions were held, livened by fruitful debates.

The second topic, as is easily understandable, gave everyone the impression of being still premature. Before beginning to formulate the articles of the European constitution, one should first find the means of convoking an assembly which is neither a mere meeting nor an academy, an assembly which would represent juridically the peoples of Europe, and be invested with the powers necessary for expressing their will and deliberating in their name. Here too, as recent national experience has taught the Italians, the constituent assembly must precede the constitution; and the most difficult step is precisely to make arrangements for convoking the assembly; once it is convened, one may say that the rest follows automatically.

On this preliminary question of the European constituent assembly, the delegates at Interlaken, though unanimously convinced of the urgent necessity of finding the most expeditious solution, were in disagreement on the methods. The conflict appeared particularly in relation to these points: which states will be charged with the initiative of convening the constituent assembly and inviting the others to participate? Should the initiative be taken by governments or by parliaments? Should the federal juridical structure be the natural fulfilment of economic agreements completed in advance, or should the latter follow political

unification?

On these questions two points of view clashed: the French position and the Italian. The French delegates, from the beginning, wanted to carry out the initiative already taken officially by their government on the 18th of August, when France proposed to the five states which signed the Brussels Pact that a European assembly be convoked and organized at once; to these five states should be reserved henceforth, by right of priority, the task of issuing invitations, and the states to be invited should be all Western European participants in the Marshall Plan; furthermore, the initiative entrusted to the five inviting states should be executed in the beginning by means of agreements between governments.

The Italian delegation upheld a much broader plan, whose essential points were: each national delegation participating at Interlaken should assume the duty of bringing about, within three months, the agreement of its own parliament to participate, with its own representatives (elected by each parliament, one per million inhabitants), in a European constituent assembly which should be convened no later than March 31, 1949; as soon as this obligation had been assumed by six states (whichever they might be) the governments of these six states should form, each appointing one delegate, a provisory executive committee for the convening of the assembly. The constitution approved by this assembly should be submitted for ratification to the states; and as soon as six had ratified it, the European federation would be definitively in existence. This system, therefore, abolished all a priori distinctions between inviting and invited states; it entrusted the initiative to parliaments, not to governments; and not only the convening of the constituent assembly but also the coming into force of the constitution voted upon, would occur so to speak automatically, as a consequence of the consent of the six most prompt states.

Between these extremes the congress decided upon an intermediate solution: the French proposal was approved (with the Italian delegation abstaining and the Greek and Turkish representatives voting against); but in addition it was voted that membership be open from the beginning to all the nations of democratic Europe which express the desire to join, and which adhere to the Bill of Human Rights formulated by the United Nations (i.e., not only those participating in the Marshall Plan); on the other hand, if initiative is not taken immediately by the governments, each delegation bound itself, by means of a "plan of action" voted upon at the end, to present to its own parliament a motion with the same intention.

As for the composition of the Assembly, the congress suggested that delegates of member states be chosen, one per million inhabitants, with however a maximum of forty and a minimum of six, in order to avoid sacrificing the small nations. On this point lively discussions took place concerning participation of representatives of non-European states and territories which are a kind of extra-European prolongation of certain European states: for example, the British Dominions or the territories of the French Union. If these territories are to be represented in the European constituent assembly, the constitution of the United States of Europe will depend in reality on the will of non-European populations, and Europe will find itself becoming (as an Italian delegate observed) a part of the Commonwealth of Britain. On this slippery terrain the Interlaken congress decided to proceed no farther, and prudently restricted itself to the hope that participation of overseas territories associated with European states would be so proportioned as to equate fairly their rights in Europe with the duties and burdens they will be prepared to assume there.

These were the deliberations at Interlaken in the realm of immediate practical possibilities. Today in Europe one has the same problem, on a much vaster scale, which existed in Italy before her unification, when Montanelli was studying the ways of uniting in a single Italian constituent assembly representatives of the various states in which Italy was divided at that time. If all the states had agreed to the idea of sending representatives to the national assembly which was dreamed of, Italian unity would have been a reality as soon as the assembly held its first session; but other paths were chosen by destiny.

What roads will destiny choose for the unification of Europe? No doubt the simplest and most orderly would be the one sketched out by the schemes at Interlaken; but, alas, history does not always follow, in fulfilling her plans, the roads which are smooth and most direct. Anyone who was present at the sessions of this congress returns without excessive illusions, but nevertheless with a certain feeling of moderate and reasonable confidence, which results from having calculated the obstacles from close by, and from having

perceived that, on the whole, it would not be practically impossible to overcome them. Today it is clear that the United States of Europe is no utopia, no mirage disappearing within the clouds; it is an earthly possibility within reach of human will. All depends on the will; and what is difficult is not to find those who are willing (since everyone talks of being willing), but to distinguish and isolate those who really are not.

One confusion which seems to have been definitely eliminated at Interlaken, thanks to a greater precision of terminology which corresponds to a clarification of ideas, was the ambiguity which some would like to preserve between a "union" and a "federation" of states: i.e., between "union," which would be the jealous guarding of the national sovereignty of each state and the repetition of the unhappy experiment of the League of Nations; and "federation," which means a conscious and voluntary breaking and limitation of national sovereignties, and the creation of a single sovereign state above them, in which all citizens of the component states would directly acquire citizenship. At Interlaken this confusion was clarified. The United States of Europe, if it is to be a reality, will be a federation, not a union. On this point the discussion of the fundamental principles of the European constitution was useful, since it served to bring to the surface the disagreement, and to give a crushing victory to the "federalists" over the "unionists." This was the only case when a national delegation split openly into two camps: the British delegates of the Labour Party voted, along with the whole French and Italian delegations, for federation, while the British Conservatives voted for union, and they remained in a minority.

Apart from this one case, the national delegations always voted in a bloc on every other debated question, even when their members belonged to different parties. This national solidarity did not seem to me a good omen: in a congress aiming to prepare for a European state in which national points of view will be transcended and debates will take place on questions common to all the peoples of the federation, one would expect to see, at least sometimes, an alignment of parties rather than an alignment of nations: not an alliance of socialists and Catholics because they are French or because they are Italian, but an alliance of French and Italians because they are socialists or because they are Catholics. Nothing of the sort took place. In international congresses the first effect of contact between delegations of different nationality seems to be an unconscious strengthening of jealous national interests, which often is hardly distinguishable from nationalism. At Interlaken too there were no alignments dictated by party considerations, nor were there any systematic contacts between representatives of the same party in the different delegations; only on the last day was there a meeting of Catholic delegates, along with a few personal contacts between socialists of different countries. (Once only during the discussion of the legislative powers of the federation, when it seemed that the question of divorce was about to come up, a certain rallying of Catholic elements from various nations was visible for a few moments.) Every delegation seemed to be guided primarily by considerations based on its own internal politics: certain attitudes of the French delegation, expressing a lack of confidence in the plan to entrust the federalist initiative to parliaments, were related to France's own unstable parliamentary situation; so also there was a certain tendency on the part of the British delegation not to compromise itself in any definitive solutions, reflecting the cautious desire of the Labour government to take no steps which might give pretexts to the Conservative opposition. In general it was clear that federalist fervor among the various European peoples is the more passionate as the internal economic situation is the more grave: whereas the countries which were most disrupted by the war, like France and Italy, were warmly federalistic, the states of northern Europe would be satisfied with a union which leaves the sovereignty and the finances of each intact and separate. ("All are federalists," remarked a journalist, "when it is a question of pooling debts.")

I also noted (and this too seemed to me no comforting omen for the future of federalism) the virtually total lack of any reference whatsoever, either in reports or in discussions, to the social aspects of the problem of federalism. Everyone talked about the United States of Europe, but no one, not even the federalists, recalled even once, even as a distant goal, the United Socialist States of Europe. The only voice in the Interlaken congress which pointed out that the United States of Europe, if it is to be vital, must be founded not only on democratic liberty but also on social justice, was the voice of De Gasperi, in his telegram of greetings which was read during the inaugural session; and the only proposal to insert a reference to this question in the resolutions came also from the Italian delegation. All this, of course, has no great importance: in founding a federal state the first step must be to overcome the constitutional questions of sovereignty and political representation, and only when the juridical form of the state is constructed will it be possible to pour into its

mold the substance of social problems on a European scale; nevertheless the absence at Interlaken of delegates from the labor forces, and the silence on the very problems which interest most directly the laboring classes, gave a feeling of emptiness. Nobody said that European and world federation, far from being a kind of plaything of societies of "bourgeois" jurists (as the Communists put it), are a vital necessity, above all for the laboring classes, who are the real victims of the economic rivalries and military warfare which nationalisms create.

The Interlaken congress demonstrated that the model for building the United States of Europe is already at hand. What is still lacking is the divine afflatus which will breathe a soul into this clay as it lies in orderly disposition, which will make of it a living creature: the Europe of the peoples, of the fields and the shops and the schools, not the Europe of the governments and the diplomats.

What will be the fateful occasion from which will rise, like an unexpected spark, this life-giving breath? What will be the decisive event which will drive the peoples to take the final step, which will give this federation, already in model in the laboratory of the jurists, the irresistible impulse of historical necessity? At the congress of Interlaken this anguished question was in the background of everyone's thought, even if no one dared to spoil the holiday by talking of such anxieties. Indeed, no one can close his eyes to the fact that the feeling which has, in these recent years, brought to the foreground the problem of European federation, has been not so much the need of pooling resources for peace and helping each other to repair the general wreckage left by the recent world war, as it has been the terror of a third catastrophe: the sharpening of the collision between America and Russia, and the possibility, perhaps the imminence, of a third war even more horrible, which would have Europe for its battlefield, and which would extinguish for all time the flickering light of European civilization. The United States of Europe is a safeguard against the third world war: but will it arrive in time to forestall the clash? Will it have enough strength, spiritual and material, to constitute an obstacle between the two hostile blocs, and to guarantee peace? Will it have a third solution of its own for the world crisis, which can serve as a middle way between the two different ideas which today are struggling for the world? Or will the United States of Europe itself become, unhappily, an instrument of war?

In the original text of the letter sent by the Interlaken congress to the governments and parliaments, there was an allusion to a Europe which proposes "to be a hyphen between the great world powers which are in danger of colliding." The word "hyphen" aroused some comments: some thought the phrase too modest to define the task of Europe, which is to defend the civilization she has given birth to; others thought that "hyphen" was too "neutral," in the presence of the threat of a conflict in which Europe with all her power—military included—should, they believed, take a stand right now.

Almost simultaneously with the Interlaken congress, which pointed to federation as the way to preserve peace, there had assembled at Wroclaw in Poland a world congress of intellectuals, with the purpose of issuing its call for peace, addressed to men of culture throughout the whole world. Both there and here men of diverse political faiths declared themselves in agreement in their desire to exorcise the scourge of war; the words in both cases were the same; and yet each of these two gatherings thought it discerned, in the plea of the other, an underlying intent of belligerency. This is now the tragedy: this impossibility of expressing different political faiths without being thereby considered the opposings flanks of two armies ready to cut each other's throats. It is a curse, when words have lost their meaning and men understand one another no more, and if one cries peace from this side, on the other war is heard, and so the dialogue goes back and forth, harmonious in words, discordant in meaning.

The Interlaken congress proceeded, as I have said, in an atmosphere of idyllic serenity; two shadows, however, passed for a few instants over this serenity, and they seemed symbolical.

Hardly had I arrived when, as I was buying a daily newspaper at the first newsstand I came upon, the vendor announced with a smile, "Very good news, monsieur: Zhdanov is dead—the secretary of the Cominform!" She was a little old woman with an air of suffering, poorly dressed; it took me a few moments to realize that this poor woman actually believed that even for her the death of the Secretary of the Cominform was a happy event. By what intuition or what superstition had she been convinced that Zhdanov himself was

personally involved in her misery? What instincts of wisdom, or what poisons of hatred and terror are now flowing in the blood of the Europeans, causing even the poor little people to reason in such terms?

Later, on the last day of the congress, proceedings were interrupted by the news of another death: M. Bohy, the President, arose and announced with a solemn voice: "Death has come to Benes, who spent his whole life in defense of freedom." For a few moments the deputies stood, in silence, thinking of freedom, and of those who renounce life for its sake.

Zdhanov, Benes. . . . Evidently the problem of the United States of Europe is not merely an elegant academic matter.

September 6, 1948.

—*Translated By Gertrude S. Hooker*