

European Parliament/Bronislaw Geremek European Civilisation Chair

Inaugural Lecture

Dear Rector,
Dear Vice-Rector
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Colleagues,
Dear Students,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, allow me to thank our Rector and Vice-Rector for their presence here today and for their kind words, as well as for the most kind message from Mr. Buzek, the President of the European Parliament. It is for me a great honour and privilege to give this inaugural lecture of the European Parliament/Bronislaw Geremek European Civilisation Chair at the College of Europe.

Professor Geremek has been a reference for me since the old days of *Solidarnosc* in Poland, in the early 1980s. I had the privilege of reading his *Laudatio* when he kindly went to Lisbon to receive the Honorary Doctorate that the Catholic University of Portugal awarded him in 2003. Then he kindly invited me to participate at a conference on “Voices of Europe”, which he promoted in Warsaw in the Spring of 2003. That was my first visit to this beautiful Natolin campus of the College of Europe, and I must confess that I immediately fell in love with it.

I was therefore delighted when, last December, I received a letter from Rector Demaret informing me that I had been selected for this Chair promoted by the European Parliament in honour of Professor Geremek. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the College of Europe for having chosen me, and I would like to guarantee that I will take my new duties very seriously.

My gratitude to the College of Europe must actually be extended to Poland. Shortly before deciding to apply to this chair, I had received a very touching and inspiring award from Poland: the Medal of Gratitude, awarded by the “European Solidarity Centre”, based at Gdansk, to those who have supported the resistance of Poles against Communism in the early 1980s.

My attachment to Poland goes indeed back at least to the early 1980s. I then learnt to admire this great European country that, in spite of so many adversities, has remained committed to the noble ideals of the European civilization, even more so than perhaps many countries in Western Europe. As Professor Geremek said:

“I believe that in Western Europe the sense of belonging to European civilization is felt less strongly than in the countries of Central Europe. For us it has always been an aspiration, while in Western Europe the process of unification has advanced with difficulty and has been associated with squabbles over agricultural policy. It seemed that the European Community would never be able to resolve the issue of the production and sale of eggs.”¹

Professor Norman Davies has made a similar point when he remarked that “for the Poles, the West is a dream, a land beyond the rainbow, the lost paradise. The Poles are more Western in their outlook than the inhabitants of most Western countries”.²

At the core of what we might call the Western disposition of Poland, there certainly has been the Polish double experience of 20th century totalitarianisms – German Nazism and Soviet Communism. Poland was actually the first main target of the two crude totalitarian powers which have dragged Europe into the Second World War.

Winston Churchill, incidentally, perceived this very fact and said it bluntly to Stalin in a telegram dated April 29, 1945:

“It was on account of Poland that Britain went to war with Germany in 1939. We saw in the Nazi treatment of Poland a symbol of Hitler’s vile and wicked lust of conquest and subjugation, and his invasion of Poland was the spark that fired the mine. (...) This British flame burns still among all classes and parties in this Island, and in the self-governed Dominions, and they can never feel this war will have ended rightly unless Poland has a fair deal in the full sense of sovereignty, independence, and freedom, on the basis of friendship with Russia. It was on this that I thought we had agreed at Yalta.”³

It was therefore Poland that warned Winston Churchill of the threat of an Iron Curtain which was descending across Europe. It was therefore Poland that was at the origin of Churchill’s famous speech at Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, which was broadcast throughout the United States and became known as the “Iron Curtain speech”, possibly the formal starting point of the Cold War:

“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around

¹ Bronislaw Geremek, “Un confine aperto”, *Ulisse 2000*, 81, Dec. 1990, pp. 124-5, quoted by Francesco M. Cataluccio, “In Search of Lost Europe”, Introduction to Bronislaw Geremek, *The Common Roots of Europe*, London, Polity Press, 1996, p. 14.

² Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland’s Present*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001 (1884), p. 303.

³ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 6, *Triumph and Tragedy*, London, Folio Society edition, 2008 (1959), p. 388.

them lie in what I must call the soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.”⁴

Having been the first target of Nazi and Communist invasion and occupation in 1939, Poland then became hostage to total Soviet occupation at the end of the war. In other words, Poland experienced first hand the great European tragedy of the Second World War and the brutal consequences of totalitarian ideas that had grown very popular among some Western European intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s.

It would not be possible to trace here the origins of the growth of Nazi and Communist ideas in Europe in the years between the first and second World Wars. But we must at least recall the destructive effects of World War I on European political and moral references. As the great German-American historian Fritz Stern, who was also a close friend of Professor Geremek, put it,

“It (World War I) was an earthquake, in the words of Elie Halevy, an earthquake that destroyed the old historic Europe. Now, even more clearly than before, we can see the war as the prelude to the totalitarian era. This first total war left a legacy of sanctioned violence; it inflamed nationalism (and bred revulsion from it and its seeming twin, militarism); it established a war-conditioned state socialism; and it exacerbated almost every preexisting conflict in Europe. It was a remarkable hope that out of that war could come a new world, a world safe for democracy. In fact the war created the conditions for Bolshevism and Fascism and set the stage for the world-historical clash between the United States and Bolshevik Russia.”⁵

These effects of World War I were only aggravated by the great depression of the 1930s. As Timothy Snyder has observed,

“In 1933, the Soviet and Nazi governments shared the appearance of a capacity to respond to the world economic collapse. Both radiated dynamism at a time when liberal democracy seemed unable to rescue people from poverty (...) The Great Depression seemed to discredit the political response to the end of the First World War: free markets, parliaments, nation-states”⁶

In other words, the destruction produced by the First World War and the despair later generated by the Great Depression seemed to vindicate the main arguments against liberal democracy and the market economy. These arguments had been conspicuously presented by authors and propagandists coming from both the radical left and the radical right. Both the radical left and the radical right had famously denounced the alleged

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace” (1946), quoted by Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, London, Heinemann, 1991, p. 866.

⁵ Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992 (1955), p. xiii.

⁶ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, London, The Bodley Head, 2010, p. 17.

debility of bourgeois capitalism and bourgeois parliamentary democracy. They both had argued for the need of a strong central and single will that could supersede the alleged debility of parliamentary politics and the alleged blindness of market economies.

As Timothy Snyder put it,

“From Lenin, the Bolsheviks had inherited the principle of ‘democratic centralism’, a translation of Marxist historiosophy into bureaucratic reality. Workers represented the forward flow of history; the disciplined communist party represented the workers; the central committee represented the party; the politburo, a group of a few men, represented the central committee. Society was subordinate to the state which was controlled by party which in practice was ruled by a few people. Disputes among members of this small group were taken to represent not politics but rather history, and their outcomes were presented as its verdict.”⁷

As for the Nazis, Timothy Snyder adds that, “like the Bolsheviks, the Nazis rejected democracy, but in the name of a Leader who could best express the will of the race, not in the name of a Party that understood the dictates of history.”⁸

It may now seem implausible that such crude ideas may have gathered such widespread support during the 1920s and 1930s. But so they did. And we must remember those courageous intellectual voices that have warned against the spell of totalitarianism. Among them, it seems appropriate to recall two Austrian exiles who have also known Nazism and Communism from close quarters and did not hesitate to denounce their common barbarianism. They were Karl Popper and Friedrich A. Hayek.⁹

They both denounced in Nazism and Communism the myth of certainty and the fatal conceit inherent in the belief in comprehensive knowledge by a single mind or a single centre of command. They argued that knowledge is tentative, progresses by trial and error, needs decentralized interaction among individuals and institutions. Our civilization is actually based on this sort of interpersonal, often tacit, knowledge which no single mind or centre of control could even process, not to mention create by design. Therefore, both Popper and Hayek, -- and we could add another Austrian exile, Joseph Schumpeter,¹⁰ -- emphasized decentralized interaction, often called competition, and “creative destruction” as the main engines of economic growth, political freedom and, at an even more fundamental level, of the growth of our knowledge.

Nazism and Communism were basically two expressions of a common denial of our human condition of fallibility and imperfection, which Popper and Hayek had captured so well. Their common attempt to create a political power without limits and without

⁷ Timothy Snyder, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁸ Timothy Snyder, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁹ F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, London & New York, Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1944; K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London & New York, Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1945.

¹⁰ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York, Harper & Row, 1942.

restraint led Nazis and Communists to the crazy notion of a total state. They longed for total political control over the lives of common people, and therefore they hated all spontaneous and decentralized institutions which could represent “checks and balances” over their unlimited power.

They hated families, civil associations, autonomous institutions, bourgeois propriety and bourgeois respectability, free enterprise. They hated religion, especially the Judeo-Christian tradition that has been at the common roots of the Western and the European civilization and has constituted one of the most fundamental constraints over naked power.

Having removed all restraints over their fanatic will, Nazism and Communism produced a tremendous legacy of destruction and organized mass murder. Timothy Snyder has recently given us an updated account of this tragic legacy:

“Overall, the Nazis, with much local assistance, deliberately murdered about 5.4 million Jews, roughly 2.6 million by shooting and 2.8 million by gassing. [...] All in all, the Nazis deliberately killed about 11 million noncombatants, a figure that rises to more than 12 million if foreseeable deaths from deportation, hunger, and sentences in concentration camps are included. For the Soviets during the Stalin period, the analogous figures are approximately six million and nine million.”¹¹

This tragic legacy, produced by Nazism and Communism in 20th century Europe, is a dramatic reminder of how right and far-sighted was Lord Macaulay, the 19th century British historian, who, in anticipation, imagined what could happen to European civilization if, one day, the Judeo-Christian tradition had been removed from its horizon. He then spoke with horror of “the frightfulness of technical civilization without its mercy.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sixty-six years after the end of the Second World War and twenty-two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe has witnessed the prodigious effects of limited and representative Government under the rule of law, as well as of a market economy that has become a single market within a reunified Europe. Europe has become aware of the dangers of unlimited power and of relativistic fashions. As Isaiah Berlin recalled in his famous “Two Concepts of Liberty”,

“If I wish to preserve my liberty [...] I must establish a society in which there must be some frontiers of freedom which nobody should be permitted to cross. Different names or natures may be given to the rules that determine these frontiers: they may be called natural rights, or the word of God, or natural Law, or

¹¹ Timothy Snyder, Hitler vs. Stalin: Who Killed More?”, in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LVIII, Number 4, March 10-23, 2011, p. 36.

the demands of utility or the ‘permanent interests of man’; I may believe them to be valid *a priori*, or assert them to be my own ultimate ends, or the ends of my society or culture. [...] Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some such absolute stand.”¹²

Bronislaw Geremek has emphasized this idea of an “absolute stand” and called it “the idea of the dignity of the human person”. Allow me to recall one of the many passages which he devoted to this idea:

“C’est autour de l’idée de la dignité de la personne humaine que se sont formées les différentes formes de l’humanisme européen, depuis le temps de la chrétienté médiéval jusqu’à l’époque moderne. L’attachement et la promotion de la liberté et des droits de l’homme, de la démocratie, de l’Etat de droit, du droit des minorités, de la solidarité, sont la conséquence de ce choix fondamental. Les listes des valeurs européens peuvent être formées de différentes façons. (...) mais ce qui me semble unir toutes ces listes, c’est la place centrale qu’y occupe la référence à la personne humaine.”¹³

It was this European idea of the dignity of the human person, Geremek argued, that not only distinguished free Europe from occupied Europe during the Cold War, but was ultimately at the core of the success of free Europe.

“Dans l’Europe divisée entre l’Est et l’Ouest, à l’époque de la guerre froide, ‘l’observateur engagé’ de Varsovie, de Budapest ou de Prague ne doutait pas que le redressement de l’Ouest et son organisation en Communauté soient de formidables succès. L’Est restait soumis à un régime impérial imposé, incapable même de créer des structures de coopération économique efficaces, dépassées par l’évolution de l’Occident. Cette image a nourri du côté de l’Est un ‘rêve européen’ dont faisait partie l’espoir qu’un jour viendrait où les pays soumis au pouvoir soviétique pourraient rejoindre l’Europe de la liberté.”¹⁴

This dream eventually became true, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989. But before that, as Professor Geremek also recalled, “Central European societies paid the price of their struggle for freedom on the streets of Budapest in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1956, 1968, 1970, and in 1981.”¹⁵

Now, twenty-two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe has been reunited and the language of liberty, the rule of law and human rights has become widely accepted. Therefore, we look back with astonishment and disbelief at the amazing attractive power of Nazi and Communist ideas in the early 20th century.

¹² Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”, in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 164-5.

¹³ Bronislaw Geremek, “L’Europe en crise?”, in B. Geremek and Robert Picht (eds), *Visions d’Europe*, Paris. Odile Jacob, 2007, p. 20.

¹⁴ B. Geremek, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ B. Geremek, “The Transformation of Central Europe”, in Marc F. Plattner and Joao C. Espada (Eds), *The Democratic Invention*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 70.

Perhaps, **ladies and gentlemen**, we should further enquire into the broader cultural and intellectual atmosphere in which the seeds of totalitarianism were sown and eventually grew.

There is now an impressive array of scholarly studies about this peculiar constellation of ideas, or political culture, which was at the origin of the so-called German paradox: how one of the most culturally rich European societies could have allowed Nazism to prevail. Professor Richard Evans has certainly produced one the most impressive historical overviews of how National-Socialism came to prevail in Germany.¹⁶ But some of the most seminal contributions to this field were produced in the 1960s by two German scholars often neglected today. I have already referred to Professor Fritz Stern, but I have not mentioned my generous supervisor at Oxford, the late Lord Dahrendorf, who in 1965 published his influential book *Society and Democracy in Germany*.

Both Stern and Dahrendorf have drawn our attention to certain ideas that were toyed with by decent men who would never have accepted Nazism or Communism – and indeed most did not accept, when they lived to experience them. Stern and Dahrendorf have referred to a complex and somewhat vague constellation of ideas which stressed the alleged decadence of European culture under the alleged threat of bourgeois utilitarianism and bourgeois capitalism. Some people called this the opposition between society and community. Others said it was an opposition between money and nobility, or between materialistic civilization and spiritual culture. Others still perceived it as a conflict between Anglo-American capitalism and European culture.

Some, possible most, of these people were decent men. They were lamenting what they perceived as a decline in culture, morals and moeurs, a decline in a shared sense of duty among their fellow citizens. And they attributed this alleged moral and cultural decay to the forces of capitalism, the profit motive, the obsession with technology and with utilitarian calculation. There is nothing necessarily threatening in this sort of cultural pessimism, and the free expression of this type of views is certainly part of a vibrant and free public square.

The problem starts when this pessimism becomes hostage to what Dahrendorf described as “those unfortunate dichotomies in which German thought is rich, and of which the contrast between a higher literary ‘culture’ and a lowly technical ‘civilisation’ is but one example”.¹⁷ Dahrendorf perceived one of the main origins of these ‘unfortunate dichotomies’ in a distinguished German sociologist, who in 1887 had published an influential book on “Community and Society”. Dahrendorf then referred to

“the untranslatable dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which was invented by a man who also liked to confront good and evil in the form of culture

¹⁶ Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, London, Allen Lane, 2003.

¹⁷ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*, New York & London, Norton, 1967 (1965), p. 120.

and civilization and was one of the most effective cultural pessimists in German sociology, Ferdinand Tönnies.”

Dahrendorf’s account of Tönnies dichotomy was uncompromising. He said it was “historically misleading, sociologically uninformed and politically illiberal.”

This ideological dichotomy first ignores what Adam Smith so accurately observed in his much ignored, at least in pre-war Germany, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: that most of our rules of civilized behaviour have emerged from decentralised interaction and not from centrally designed commands. In other words, that so-called capitalism and free-exchange under the rule of law actually tend to foster virtues of thrift, hard-work and promise-keeping among peaceful people who aspire to better their own condition. Secondly, Tönnies’s dichotomy paves the way for a view of society as a uniform unit, rather than a varied and pluralistic mix of different ways of life that interact with each other and learn from each other in a decentralized manner. Thirdly, because societies are not and perhaps have never been uniform units, that view inevitably leads to an appeal to state power to introduce order and uniformity where one can only perceive variety as a synonym of disorder.

This is what Dahrendorf called “the myth of the state”. It completely overturns the proper role and scope of the state in a free society. Rather than being perceived as a guarantor of liberty and the peaceful enjoyment of different ways of life, the state is then called to become an organizer, *the* organizer, of people’s ways of life. Society ceases to be a *grown* order, as Friedrich Hayek called it, and becomes an organization or a *made* order.¹⁸ In other words, society ceases to be what Michael Oakeshott called a *civil association* or a *nomocracy* and becomes an *enterprise association* or *telocracy*,¹⁹ therefore blurring the crucial distinction between state and civil society. As Bronislaw Geremek emphasized, “the distinction between state and society, absent from oriental models of historical evolution, plays an important role in the evolution of the West from the Middle Ages onwards.”²⁰

Ladies and gentlemen,

Last but certainly not least, this view of society as a uniform unit and of the state as the organizer of society leads and has led to a profound misunderstanding of European civilisation. Instead of being perceived as a *conversation to be continued*, European civilization is then described as a *blueprint to be achieved*. A blueprint, however, can hardly be reconciled with the peaceful enjoyment of different ways of life to which different people are attached. A blueprint calls for a clash of worldviews, rather than for peaceful accommodation and peaceful competition between them under the rule of law. A blueprint lacks what Fritz Stern called “a culture of equipoise”.

¹⁸ F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

¹⁹ M. J. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, and *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*, edited by Terry Nardin and Luke O’Sullivan, London, Imprint Academic, 2006.

²⁰ B. Geremek, *The Common Roots of Europe*, London, Polity Press, 1996, p. 165.

This culture of equipoise, of moderation and compromise, of “live and let live”, is a crucial element of our European civilisation. It is at the root of what has made Europe different and enviable at the eyes of so many peoples outside Europe who have been unfortunate victims of tyranny and despotism.

We have given a name to this root of Western and European civilisation, since our ancestors in Athens, 2500 years ago.

That name is Liberty.

We should not forget that at the core of liberty is a culture of equipoise and conversation. As Michael Oakeshott put it,

“We should consider a society governed wholly by its past, or its present, or its future to suffer under a despotism of superstition which forbids freedom. The politics of our society are a conversation in which past, present and future each has a voice; and though one or other of them may on occasion prevail, none permanently dominates, and on this account we are free.”²¹

It was this idea of Europe as an on-going and free conversation between different voices and different traditions that was emphasized by Professor Geremek in his scholarly works on Medieval Europe. In his book on *The Common Roots of Europe*, Geremek wrote:

“The civil and socio-political European community formed itself around varying cultural traditions, amid changes in evolutionary dynamics and within processes of a discontinuous nature. The cultural inheritance of the ancient world, which functioned as a creative force for European unity, constantly renewing itself, was linked with the Mediterranean region, whereas continental structures and centres played a fundamental role in the development of medieval Europe.”²²

It was this idea of Europe as an on-going and free conversation between different voices and different traditions that inspired all the great defenders of the European ideal in the 20th century. To mention just a few, we can say that from Coudenhove-Kalergi, to Ortega y Gasset, Thomas Mann, Denis de Rougemont or Raymond Aron, Jan Patocka or Milan Kundera, not to mention of course Bronislaw Geremek, for all of them, the European project and the European ideal have always been perceived as a project against totalitarian power and totalitarian worldviews.

For these brave men, the European project has always been associated with liberal democracy and the rule of law. It was Raymond Aron who famously remarked that “democracy is the common work of rival parties”. And indeed the European Union has been the common work of rival parties. At the core of the European project in the second

²¹ M. J. Oakeshott, “The Political Economy of Freedom”, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, With a Foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis, Liberty Press, 1991, p. 388.

²² B. Geremek, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

half of the 20th century there has been a sort of centrist understanding between liberals, conservatives, Christian-democrats and social-democrats. This understanding does not erase, and has not erased the differences between those political parties and families. As Raymond Aron had said, this common understanding on the European project has indeed been the common work of rival parties. We could hardly find a better expression of the idea of conversation and of the culture of equipoise than this common understanding of the European ideal between rival views.

The crucial importance of a culture of conversation and equipoise was emphasized by Ralf Dahrendorf at the very end of his small great book on the European revolution of 1989, or “refolution”, as Timothy Garton Ash famously called it.²³ At the very end of his book, Dahrendorf quotes Edmund Burke in a passage that strikes a chord among all those who cherish liberty and moderation. Burke said and Dahrendorf quoted:

“I have little to recommend my opinions but long observation and much impartiality... They come from one, almost the whole of whose public exertion has been a struggle for the liberty of others...One who, when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails may be endangered by over-loading it upon one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may preserve its equipoise.”²⁴

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dahrendorf’s book was published in 1990, was entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, and was significantly written “as a letter to a gentleman in Warsaw”. That this gentleman might well have been Bronislaw Geremek, who was a close friend of Dahrendorf, is a happy note for the conclusion of this lecture as a tribute to Professor Bronislaw Geremek and his commitment to the European civilisation.

Thank you.

²³ Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin & Prague*, Cambridge, Granta Books, 1990.

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, London, 1790, quoted by Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, London, Random House, 1990, p. 164.