

Author: Stanislav Maselnik

Denis de Rougemont was a main thinker of the so-called *non-conformistes des années trente*, a movement of young intellectuals that appeared in France at the morrow of the turbulent 1930s, in opposition to both individualism represented by liberalism and rising collectivism. [1] The main bulk of their work was published between 1930-34 and was concentrated around three separate currents.

The founders and members of *L'Ordre nouveau*. An intellectual movement established by the Russian migrant Alexandre Marc (born in 1904 in Odessa as Aleksander Markovitch Lipiansky), its goal was to prepare the conditions for a 'spiritual rebirth' of the European culture. Its effort was concentrated on going beyond such dualistic divisions as nationalism-internationalism and capitalism-communism. Its inspirations came, among other sources, from the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard, the federalism of Proudhon, the great critique of Modernity Nietzsche, or from the historicism of Péguy. The thinkers who were a part of *L'Ordre nouveau* also included Robert Aron, Arnaud Dandieu, Daniel-Rops, Jean Jardin and finally Denis de Rougemont.

The Catholic revue *L'Esprit* of Emmanuel Mounier, founded in 1932. From the beginning it evolved in tight collaboration with *L'Ordre nouveau*. In reaction to the events of the Second World War it radically shifted to the political left, in order to slowly move back to more moderate positions of the 'New Left', under which it still publishes to this date. Young thinkers of *Jeune Droite*, who were mostly dissidents of the French reactionary and monarchistic right *Action française*. These thinkers included Jean de Fabrègues, Jean-Pierre Maxence and Thierry Maulnier.

Furthermore, Ferdinand Kinsky also includes among them those thinkers, from whom the non-conformists drew their inspiration: Stern, Blondel, Buber, Nédoncelle, Karl Barth, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain or Nicholas Berdiaeff. [2]

Although the non-conformists came from different backgrounds and their thinking took on some issues rather opposing positions, they all subscribed to the doctrine of 'personalism', and, consequently, to federalism. The non-conformists converged on the point that

'man was above all not an "individual." He is a "person," that is both responsible and free, committed and autonomous, a being in himself, but related to his fellowmen by his responsibility'. [3]

As a person, human being is not a lonely monad, not even a rational being, which could exist outside of society, but a social entity whose nature is fulfilled only by sharing his life in common with others. To live within a society does not mean to be enclosed in a 'homogeneous' nation-state, but to be a part of multiple and overlapping 'intermediary' communities, which are most naturally formed around family, territory, or profession. For the non-conformists/personalists, these intermediary communities both historically and

philosophically ultimately share the common European 'well' from which they draw their actual particular ideas and traditions. Europe and its culture for them necessarily precede nations and nation-states. The thinkers such as the Schlegels or Herder constructed the idea of a self-sufficient nation from already present, primordial European philosophical and historical traditions. The English historian Christopher Dawson best summarises this position in his 1932 work *The Making of Europe*, when he notes that

'The evil of nationalism does not consist in its loyalty to the traditions of the past or in its vindication of national unity and right of self determination. What is wrong is the identification of this unity with the ultimate and inclusive unity of culture which is a supernatural thing.'

'The ultimate foundation of our culture is not the national state, but the European unity'. [4]

The nation-state was thus only one realised possibility of the European culture. A peculiar thing about nationalist movements was that they consciously denied the notion of their own continuity and grounding in the *common* European history and philosophical thought. Martin Heidegger would say this was a perfect manifestation of the 'metaphysics of subjectivity' – they picked up one particular set of characteristics out of their European heritage and by intellectual sleight of hand, suppressing the memory of their nations continuity with other European sources, [5] argued for their 'homogeneity and cultural self-sufficiency'.

The French thinker Alain de Benoist recently argued from the same perspective, when he distinguished our 'objective' history as 'a pile of representations of identity of past times and past protagonists', [6] from our actual-assumed identity, whose dimension is always political since it is based on the projection of our past towards the future. In other words, our actual identity (in the 19th and 20th c., it was that of nations and nation-states), always grounds the collective 'I' in the past, based on values and necessities of the present and possibilities of the future. As Alain de Benoist adds, 'memory screens [our timely, historical identity] and retains what conforms to its idea of the past and to the image it wants to give in order to give it a *meaning*'. [7]

Diversity of European identities

The purpose of Denis de Rougemont's book *The Idea of Europe* is precisely to rip off our identity from the grip of the present and selective memory of nation-states and ground it in the timely and space-bound objective narrative of Europe. Rougemont's preface to the book also forms the general *leitmotif* that weaves through the whole work:

'Europe is much older than the European nations. Their lack of unity and their ever more illusory claims to absolute sovereignty endanger its very existence. If only they could unite, Europe would be saved, and with it all that remains valuable in its richly creative diversity'. [8]

'from that time onward the name of Europe and the concept of Europe will recur in even more solemn contexts down to the Carolingian Empire, in apostrophes to the Pope, in ecclesiastical panegyrics, in prose and verse chronicles, and in the lives of the saints'. [12]

The final step was taken with Charlemagne, whose dominium was called *'Europe vel Regnum Caroli'* and on whom his court poet Angilbert bestowed the titles of 'head of the world . . . summit [or tiara] of Europe . . . supreme father'. [13] Europe thus becomes a political entity, which is not merely constructed as one of the contemporary three divisions of the map of the world (Europe, Libya or Africa, Asia), it is finally an 'autonomous entity, endowed with spiritual virtues'. [14]

As we know however, this was a premature spring and the fragmentation of Charlemagne's empire under his three sons soon followed, as if in the anticipation of the things to come in the period from the 17th to 20th century. On 434 pages, Denis de Rougemont continues to recount various conceptualisations of Europe that followed. Nevertheless, what is probably the most intriguing section of the book is part seven, [15] where he tries to mend together various 20th century historians and thinkers to give us an idea what 'European identity' means, if it went through such diverse historical manifestations.

Rougemont's conceptualisation of European identity

First of all, through his overview of different conceptualisations of Europe, Rougemont lead us to reject the idea that there could be one 'true' atemporal European essence, which could be taken as the lowest 'common denominator' of everything European. [16] Europe is above all the totality of its representations – and a European is in the first instance the one who finds in its diversity something that resonates with his 'present I'. The first step in the formation of any identity is thus conscious self-identification, finding one's possibilities not by 'returning to the sources', but by resorting to the sources in order to discover how do they fit into one's present and future. It might be therefore said that there are 'two Europes', the one which is philosophical and historical, i.e., the one which provides us through its totality with different representations of what it has meant to be a European, and the other which is inherently bound to politics. The latter is dependent on the way one answers the question of what one wants Europe to be – On the way how does one 'chooses' one's identity from the possible sources. In other words, in one way Europe ('unconsciously') already 'is', but in the other way it is still dormant, waiting to be appropriated as a political project – consciously adopted as a part of our own present identity. Only when Europe materialises through the political process as a cultural entity, it will be possible to 'grasp' it and built upon it in our social life in new ways.

This idea of 'two Europes' is in fact very close to the constitutive or expressivist theory of language of Herder. Its importance was recently recognised by the Canadian communitarian thinker Charles Taylor. [17] Herder, and through him Taylor, argued that the language not only describes the reality ('what is already there', on the background), as such theorists as

Condillac claimed, but also constitutes and recreates it anew, under a different perspective. For Condillac or Locke, linguistic expression was always linked to some pre-existing content, to the idea that 'at each stage of [linguistic] process, the idea precede[d] its naming, albeit its discriminability results from a previous act of naming'. [18] Herder, however, adds to the language a new, 'expressive' dimension, claiming that the interlocution not only describes, but that 'it also open[s] possibilities for us which would not be there in its absence'. [19] In other words, by saying something, we do not only *describe* what is already there, but also *shape* it to a new dimension. By creating a political Europe, we do not only re-represent what is already there, but we are giving Europe a new dimension by the creative process itself.

Perhaps this was also a reason why Heidegger in his later thought credited the poetry for allowing us to temporally ascend to the 'authentic' Being. As one of Heidegger's interpreters Richard Polt notices, 'if Heidegger is right, then our most authentic relation to language is poetic. Instead of using language as a tool for representation, we should respect it as a rich source of poetic revelation'. [20] The poet thus represents an authentic existence – instead of using old words and worn out meanings, he 'appropriates' the reality in relation to his own person. Does it mean that all great minds who try to build Europe politically are also poets?

This excursion to the theory of language might help us appreciate what Denis de Rougemont is ultimately suggesting in his search for 'the' European identity. Although there are undeniable sources of European culture such the ancient Greece, Rome and Christianity, the Celts, or the ancient German tribes, what Europe is for us will in the last instance depend on what do we want it to be. It is true that the most of the European thought arose as the positive or negative reaction to the ancient Greeks, be it the Romans with their sombre *gravitas* who unsuccessfully tried to emulate the joyous Greek spirit, or the Christians who upheld the rational Apollo at the expense of Dionysos. Nevertheless, in the last instance it always depends on ourselves whether we identify with these sources or not. Paul Valéry for instance felt closest to the Greeks, claiming that

'what we owe to Greece is perhaps what has most profoundly distinguished us from the rest of humanity. To her we owe the discipline of the Mind, the extraordinary example of perfection in everything. To her we owe the method of thought that tends to relate all things to man, the complete man. Man became for himself the *system of reference* to which all things must in the end relate. He must therefore develop all the parts of his being and maintain them in a harmony as clear and even as evident as possible. He must develop both body and mind'. [21]

Denis de Rougemont would have certainly agreed with Valéry. One might even argue that personalism itself – with its conception of a person as against the liberal idea of a self-sufficient individual, is the conscious adoption of the Greek heritage on the part of the non-conformists. Rougemont keenly notices that our Greek heritage has become in the recent years more important, arguing that

'the revival of our interest in things Greek is reflected in the twentieth century by the most varied symptoms: discovery of the pre-Socratic philosophers . . . the vogue for

mythology (Freud's Oedipus complex, the *Ulysses* of Joyce or Kazantzakis, Spitteler's *Prometheus*, Gide's *Theseus*, Cocteau's *Orpheus*, etc); revival of the themes and titles of Greek tragedy by many playwrights, poets, and composers ("Choephores and Eumenides," by Claudel and Darius Milhaud, to mention only one example, re-created the sacred thrill of the ancient drama, of which a poet like Racine retained only the plot); rediscovery of the secret of the Doric style; passionate researches into the mystery religions . . . [22] '.

Philosophically and historically, as Denis de Rougemont shows us in *The Idea of Europe*, we therefore already are Europeans. Politically and in our memory, some still consider themselves to be enclosed within 'homogeneous' national entities and deny their shared European roots. Only the future will show us, however, whether we will also manage to appropriate our identity politically.

Footnotes:

[1] Probably the most exhaustive treatment of the movement's history and its fundamental ideas is given by Bayle, Jean-Louis Loubet Del, *Les non-conformistes des années 30 : Une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française* (Paris, Seuil, 2001[1969]). Bayle is also credited for being the first to call the movement 'non-conformistes des années trente'.

[2] Kinsky, Ferdinand, 'Personalism and Federalism', *Publius*, 9:4 (1979), p. 132.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[4] Quoted in Rougemont, Denis de, *The Idea of Europe* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 422.

[5] Anthony D. Smith already showed that the 'nation builders' drew heavily from more primordial European ethnicities and regional identities, see for instance *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[6] 'On Identity', *Telos*, 128 (2004), p. 48.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[8] Rougemont, *The Idea of Europe*, p. xi.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 43. The French thinker Louis Rougier in the work *Celse contre les chrétiens* (Paris, Labyrinthe, 1997[1925]) used Celsus' polemic against Christian monotheism and universalism as the starting point for his own critique of Christianity.

[11] Rougemont, *The Idea of Europe*, p. 43.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 363-434.

[16] A terrific overview of what constitutes the exclusivist 'identity essentialism' and its critique is provided by Alain de Benoist, 'On Identity', pp. 52-56.

[17] Charles Taylor, 'The Importance of Herder', in C. Taylor (ed.), *Philosophical Arguments* (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 79-99.

[18] Charles Taylor, 'Heidegger, Language, Ecology', in C. Taylor (ed.), *Philosophical Arguments* (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 100-126.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[20] Richard Polt, *Heidegger An Introduction* (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 177,

[21] Quoted in Rougemont, *The Idea of Europe*, p. 367.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 370.