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RAISING THE CULTURAL CURTAIN

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RAISING THE CULTURAL CURTAIN

The dangers of peace

Though the hydrogen bomb has made war improbable, it leaves us faced with the dangers of peace. Certainly it is the only cause of the present relaxation of tension. This has not come about through the virtuous intentions or sincerity of one or other of the two giant powers, nor is it even a tactical move. It did not ensue from the Geneva Conference; rather was that Conference its outward sign. It is not due to the triumph of brotherly love over hatred or of sweet reasonableness over fanaticism. It is purely and simply the outcome of fear. Between two blocs almost equally armed, and each possessing this terrible weapon, the conflict could not be a war in the conventional sense. It could only be a kind of high-voltage discharge, flashing across the world volatilising the conductors and everything in its path. Just as the converse of war was peace, so the converse of the lightning flash is a reduction of tension.

The situation we live in is thus built up of negative factors; yet it opens up certain possibilities, and the question now arising is what are the prospects for culture as understood in Europe: the inner meaning, the salt and savour of our lives, the factor which raises us above the level of animals or machines.

Benefits of the détente

There is a good deal of hard thinking on each side of the Iron Curtain over the question as to who will benefit most from the détente, assuming it really exists.

In the somewhat cautious exchanges the Russians have proposed - with particular insistence in the note inviting Chancellor Adenauer to Moscow - who stands to gain?

At first sight the answer appears simple. In a system of free exchange, the stronger party will naturally be the gainer. But in a free trade in ideas, who is to say which is the stronger party? It can be argued that the Iron Curtain was a sign of weakness. Then what are we to conclude if the Soviets raise that curtain to-day? This much is certain, that

free exchange, though inherent in the cultural life of the West, is an aspect of culture in which the Russians feel ill at ease. And the explanation to this is to be found in their notion of secrecy.

In his recently published memoir, the Italian Ambassador Quaroni tells of an interesting encounter with a Commissar of the G.P.U. in a train on the way to Moscow. This man said to Quaroni:

" 'You people in the West have rather elementary ideas about secrecy. You think it's sufficient to guard anything new or important. Now we think it's much more important to prevent the foreigner from finding out what we haven't got. You see the point? It takes much more trouble to hide what doesn't exist than what does'.

To this of course I had to agree, and I told him with a laugh that I now understood the rejoinder of a G.P.U. agent to someone who asked him what he understood by espionage: 'You meet a foreigner who is a friend of yours. He asks you what you are looking so worried about. You reply: I am broke. That friend has spied on you successfully' ". (1)

The West has everything to gain from letting the Russians know "what exists". President Eisenhower's sensational offer to let the Russians come and photograph all military establishments should also hold good for matters of culture and everyday life. We should say to them: "In our country everything is open and above board. Come and have a look round. But let us come and see what you are doing as well. From what our own communists and your cultural propaganda tell us, it seems you can have nothing to lose by it. We shall be only too delighted to convince ourselves of the truth of this."

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(1) Pietro Quaroni, Croquis d'Ambassade, 1955. The author, at present Italian Ambassador in Paris, has fulfilled several diplomatic missions in the U.S.S.R. and speaks Russian fluently.

Détente and European union

Now let us look at the question as the Europeans see it. They will say: "Will not the slackening of tension mean also the slackening of our efforts towards union?"

Our answer must be that the underlying reasons for uniting Europe are not necessarily connected with the Soviet menace. They would be substantially the same even if the U.S.S.R. with its two hundred divisions were not stretched along our frontiers.

Europe must unite in order to survive because it is weakened by its own barriers, which not only paralyse its defences but hamper its social and cultural progress. It is threatened by new forces rising in Asia and North Africa. History demands that Europe must now advance beyond the phase of absolute sovereignty which is incompatible with the economic and technical developments of the 20th century.

These urgent reasons for union are independent of Russian threats or American pressure. Some of them are inherent in the European internal situation, while others are connected with the relationship of forces throughout the world.

But there is more to it than that. If the détente is translated from mere declarations into terms of reality, cultural exchanges will be resumed; the dialogue will begin. Who will be the speakers? On the Russian side, one need hardly say that they will represent Moscow and follow the line set by the Politburo. But who will speak for Europe? The Western communists and their intellectual fellow-travellers? These have nothing to teach the Russians, who will not be interested in conversations with their puppets. The neutrals? These are the defeatists of the West; they have nothing positive to offer the Russians, and cannot claim to represent the general trend of European opinion. The governments? Very probably they will make themselves responsible. If we were thinking of a dialogue between one country and another, that would be normal. There could be contacts between France and Byelo-Russia, Germany and Georgia, Holland and the Ukraine, or even Luxembourg and Uzbekistan, rather after the manner of the inter-municipal "pairings" which are going on so well in our various countries. But the fact is that we have to talk with the U.S.S.R., a monolithic bloc of two hundred million men and women all wearing the mental blinkers of the Cominform. European ways of living and thinking will be confronted by totalitarian conceptions. As against this,

our Governments do not officially represent our artists, writers and thinkers, nor culture in general, which they do not pretend to control; that is precisely where they differ from the totalitarian dictatorships.

A dialogue between the U.S.S.R. and its partisans, or between the U.S.S.R. and half-hearted elements in the West, or finally between the U.S.S.R. and official delegates of one country or another, would not be a dialogue between A and B as equals, representing two distinct but equally valid points of view. It would be simply a futile parley between A and a, or between A and a travesty of B, or between A and less than a twentieth of B.

If détente has any real meaning, there must be a dialogue between Moscow on the one side, and Europe as it stands, diverse but indivisible, on the other. And in that case, the moral and cultural unity of our countries, is more than ever necessary - the will to unite and the consciousness of a common future which form a necessary and nearly sufficient condition for federation.

Suggestions for raising the Curtain

The fact that we have no compulsory creed by no means places us in an inferior position vis-à-vis the totalitarian doctrines of the Russians. A display of our diversity of thought and opinion will afford proof of our love of liberty. And if we follow this up by throwing open to inspection the material gains of our free intercourse of ideas, this will be the strongest card we can play.

True, our love of unfettered freedom has had certain undesirable results, among the most flagrant of which may be mentioned short-sighted or aggressive nationalism, the living conditions of considerable sections of the working class and rural population, the technical backwardness of many countries, the domination of material interests, exemplified by the supremacy of certain trusts. But it so happens that the communists approve and encourage nationalism everywhere except in countries subject directly to their rule. As far as the other matters are concerned, we have nothing to fear from an impartial comparison, except that it may make us feel smug and self-satisfied. Now our right to censure our own shortcomings and to denounce the scandals for which we blame our government

or the opposition, or which are even due to the defects of our qualities, is one of our most precious sources of strength.

The West therefore sees no danger in a free interchange of ideas, which is an essential aspect of its culture. As it has nothing to hide, it should welcome a genuine exchange of ideas in absolute freedom, and should therefore accept without reservation the renewed offers by the Russians.

These offers have been made in the name of peace, in what has again been called the "Geneva spirit". Let us take that at its face value. Instead of bemusing ourselves with idle suppositions as to the tactical or strategic motives of the Russians, let us confidently grasp this opportunity of putting our own principles into effect.

We cannot hope to be allowed straight away to go and talk to them as they talk to us - as Ilya Ehrenburg is talking, as I pen these lines, to the Rencontres Internationales at Geneva. But let us insist on the practical conditions we believe necessary for a genuine dialogue, and in doing so we shall make clear our own position.

To be of real value, there must be exchanges of elements of living culture, not slogans of political propaganda. That is tantamount to saying that they must take place between private individuals. On our side, nothing could be easier; in fact it is the only possible method. (One cannot visualise the Council of Europe appointing authorised "thinkers" and insisting on their adherence to a specific doctrine before sending them to talk to the Russians. The more such thinkers represented a "party line" - which anyway does not exist - the less they would represent Europe itself). On the Soviet side, we know very well who lays down the law, and what mental discipline is imposed on those who are allowed to speak. But whether intentionally or not, that very discipline may be made the main subject of discussion. And it may be that the Europeans, by this clash of ideas, will be induced to modify some of their ultra-individualist prejudices.

The Russians have their ideas on civic responsibilities and the duties of the intelligentsia. According to our principles, those ideas are pernicious and misleading. But the question still arises: how do we follow out those principles? That problem itself might form the subject of a debate, which would not necessarily conclude with the triumph of one camp over the other; both sides may be led to examine their attitudes anew. For us, that would be enough. The eternal challenge of Western values is not scepticism; it is the essence of Western life.

Denis de Rougemont.