

Europe – its borders and identity (Zdzisław Mach)

Europe as a social, cultural, and historical space is more difficult to define than Europe as a political, economic and legal entity. Here the criteria are more complex and more ambiguous, and perhaps also more ideologically loaded, especially when it comes to the discussion of the borders of Europe. The question of who belongs and who does not belong to Europe and what are the social and cultural criteria of belonging seems to be almost impossible to solve. Political boundaries are of course easier, and for decades Europe was polarised, divided into two halves: eastern and western, separated by the Berlin Wall – the powerful symbol of a fundamental division. With time, the political boundary became more and more meaningful, as economic and cultural differences, built upon previously existing traditions, accumulated. The concept of central Europe, which existed before the Iron Curtain in its German and Austrian versions, acquired a new meaning after 1989, indicating the area between the European Communities and the former Soviet Union, and included countries which gradually came closer and closer to the EU membership. However, the membership, once completed, will mark the end of Central Europe in its post-communist meaning, and the new East/West division will be established. It is to be hoped that the new boundary will not be made of iron. It must be remembered, that the European enlargement in its political sense indicates just the beginning of the long process of construction of the new Europe, in which plurality will continue to exist but without deep and permanent differences in the standards: economic, political, social. It is of utmost importance to prevent the construction of two European identities: old and new, western and eastern, central and peripheral. If the old divisions gradually disappear, the new European identity will be formed, and the question of what is Europe and where are its borders will be asked again, though in a different context.

The most difficult aspect of the discussion about the European identity is a search for its "essence", the core content of Europe, elements of the European cultural heritage without which there would be no Europe. Currently we are witnessing a new chapter of this debate in the work on the proposal of the European Constitution. For some people the Preamble to the Constitution is a controversial matter, in particular the issue of Christianity as a core element of the European heritage. In every attempt to define an essence of the European heritage there is a danger of exclusion. Then there will always be people in Europe who would feel excluded or who will be considered excluded by others because of not having this or that particular "essential" element. Religion is of course an obvious example of this.

It is therefore perhaps better to take a different view on identity, to consider it as a process, as activity, as building a common social and cultural space rather than as some accumulated heritage with which we identify ourselves. Citizens who participate in this process of construction of Europe, who in a complex network of dialogues "negotiate" the meaning of European identity define themselves as Europeans. Nobody is excluded from the start because of not possessing a particular characteristic previously defined as essential for European identity. Religion, race, ethnicity are no longer considered part of the definition of the European, and there is no need to establish borders of Europe, on the other side of which there are non-European "others". Thus Europe appears as a process of construction. European identity is not something, which exists but something, which is becoming, not something which one has but something which one constructs, negotiates in relations with partners. Therefore the necessary condition of the process of becoming European and acquiring European identity is a dialogue, social interaction, co-operation, but not isolation behind impenetrable borders, whether they should be built by the main stream society or by minorities. The willingness to negotiate and co-operate, to build a common Europe makes people European, this is the way they construct their European identity. This is perhaps a concept close to the French tradition of reflection about national identity, which is understood as citizens' will to participate in the nation.

There is, however, one obvious difficulty here. Co-operation in the process of construction and negotiation of the meaningful social and cultural entity, which Europe is to become, requires that there should be some common ground with which all participants in the process would identify, which they would accept as the basis for their activities. There has to be at least a minimum of common symbolic code, a language of communication, without which the process of collective construction would not be possible. It is necessary to negotiate such a common platform of values and symbolic communication, which would be acceptable to all participants of the process. Critics would naturally immediately say that such a "common platform" will be imposed by those who have power, by the main stream. But there is no other way but to attempt to build such a common ground in spite of all dangers.. Pluralism in a sociological sense can only mean diversity, which is based on some common platform of understanding. Otherwise there is no society, pluralistic or otherwise. Society implies communication and some degree of communication and manageability. The alternative is only a multiplicity of isolated elements, which do not talk to each other and do not undertake any common action. This would be a population but not a society. So, some common platform for negotiation of meaningful activities is necessary.

In search for such a common set of symbols and values one can turn to those European institutions which have proved to well represent European citizens or to those

which have a task of creating adequate conditions for co-operation in the future Europe. The Council of Europe and the European Convention may serve here as examples. Values such as openness, tolerance, respect for others, individual freedom, human rights, constant search for improvement of social life may be quoted here in this context. It seems that those values do not exclude anybody on the basis of cultural heritage. There may be people for whom some of those values may not be acceptable, but then negotiation of meaning should always be possible. Unless of course someone refuses to negotiate, but then such people would exclude themselves from the process of construction of Europe not because of not having some element of European culture but because of refusal to enter in a dialogue. In such a way the will and readiness to take part in the process of construction of a common Europe define the European borders. All who join in the process are inside. It also seems that the main "enemy" of European identity is isolation and passivity, which may be shown by newcomers to the European soil but also by established people who are not interested in working for the new, common, European culture, society and identity.

Education for new Europe should include learning about the European heritage, multicultural, pluralistic, complex and fragmented as it is, which ought to be known in order for individuals to be able to choose those elements which they like and with which they identify, but to choose in such a way that a meaningful construction emerges. Encyclopaedic knowledge of the heritage of European societies is no longer sufficient, when there is no single, imposed or generally accepted system of meanings and criteria which allow individuals to compose their world view and life style according to a given, usually inherited, cultural code. Post-modern world requires that individuals are free but also competent to construct their own meaning on their own responsibility. The future of Europe and its identity depends on whether Europeans will be able to do that. Therefore schools must not only pass to the new generation knowledge about culture but also develop in young people competence to construct meaning using the diversity of cultural elements, in a rich and pluralistic social space, and in the conditions of individual freedom. Pupils need to learn to choose, to be critical, open and tolerant but also able to defend their own point of view, to be willing and able to participate in the process of construction the common European identity. Mobile Europeans will need to know their own cultural roots as members of a local or national community, but also to be competent in cultures of other Europeans. They will need to be intellectually as well as mentally prepared to actively participate in the development of European culture and society wherever in Europe they happen to live.

Europeans have a variety of different collective identities. The one, which still appears to be the most obvious, often considered to be almost "natural", links individuals to their nation-state and national cultural heritage. The European nation is a product of modernity,

with its individualism, the values of mobility and egalitarianism, the concept of continuous social development and progress, cultural homogeneity and uniformity. In this model of the world cultural standards are generally known and accepted, and potentially accessible to everyone. The world of nation-states and national cultures is still an everyday social reality in Europe. Most Europeans still live in their modern symbolic environment of values, struggling to achieve generally accepted standards of progress.

There is of course a question of the existence of a "post-modern" society, with its negotiation of rules and standards, fragmentation of identities, temporariness of social relations and cultural affiliations. This largely still hypothetical society may be a reality for some Europeans, relatively small groups of people, mostly highly educated and wealthy professionals, whose cultural competence enables them to freely move across the boundaries of the multicultural European space, and to individually construct their cultural participation. Individual choice, absence of common, accepted standards, are characteristic of such a society, where nothing is taken for granted, nothing is imposed on individuals, who take a full advantage of their freedom. Individual construction of way of life, in which one can choose from elements belonging traditionally to different cultural contexts, replaces participation in a single, relatively integrated cultural system, which is inherited after ancestors and which provides one with a feeling of belonging and stability. Freedom means more than security, while individual creativeness and imagination determines individual life-style. Everything fits and everything goes. Nobody is expected to be consistent in his/her cultural participation, as nothing in the individual way of life is permanent, while both culture and social relations are ad hoc and negotiable.

It remains to be seen to what extent this is a true diagnosis of the direction in which the European society is developing. How many Europeans are post-modern, and how many are still comfortably resting within the secure framework of modernity. Some of the young Europeans who move freely from one place to another in Europe looking for better jobs or just sent to another end of Europe by their employers for a temporary post, are clearly examples of post-modern citizens of Europe. They choose how they live, construct their cultural participation and their social relations, transgress boundaries and feel at home everywhere they happen to be. Or is it perhaps just yet another illusion? These new post-modern people are perhaps just as much dependent of their cultural standards and socially constructed life-styles as their "modern" ancestors. Post-modernity is perhaps just another fashion, another established way of life in which mobility, individualism and intercultural imagination constitute just a new cultural norm. Everything may be temporary and ad hoc in the European culture of today and tomorrow, but people still need some common ground for negotiable symbols and values. They actively construct their world-view and are ready to

negotiate meanings and to participate in new forms of social relations. But they also need to find some balance between new experience and continuity, they search for a point of reference, a symbolic means of orientation. This is especially important for children of highly mobile people, who must build their cultural competence and ability to construct meaning. They learn new languages, but want to be able to communicate across borders. They are ready for new experience, but need a sense of continuity. Above all, they need a feeling of belonging. This is why the European identity is an important option, and this is why it is essential to negotiate a system of common European values, not exclusive and not imposed, but accepted as a result of negotiation and interpreted in a continuous dialogue. Values, which define Europe as a safe and friendly place for all who wish to contribute to its development as a free and pluralistic civil society. The current project, with its aim to construct a curriculum for those who search for such a balance between stability and mobility, is an example of an educational effort to teach migrant children the meaning of Europe.