



Berlin Conference “A Soul for Europe” European Culture Boosting Society, Politics and Economy

14-15 November 2008

Meeting Report by Simon Mundy

The third Berlin Conference “A Soul For Europe” acknowledged the manner in which the political and cultural debate has moved on in the last four years, and the enormous challenges which economic and social instability now set in its path. The point was illustrated perfectly by the fact that President Jose Manuel Barroso had to send his message by video because he was at a financial crisis summit in Washington DC, and that he was sending it as President of the Commission, not of the European Union, because of the failure of the new Treaty of Union to be ratified in a referendum by Ireland. The sense of the world outside grappling with economic catastrophe was palpable and was emphasised by the conference setting – the atrium of the Dresdner Bank next to the Brandenburg Gate.

At the first Soul for Europe event in 2004, the bank's new building had seemed to symbolise the return of prosperity to Eastern Europe, the openness of the business world to new cultural ideas and the partnerships that would shape the new century. By November 2008 there was a note of desperation in the air, and the bank's halls no longer had the same bravura confidence. The conference sessions that involved industry and banking leaders (see the impressive list of speakers) had a sense of humility for the first time and when culture was discussed, it was in terms of whether business would be best advised to adhere to national cultural loyalties or overcome them by appealing to global tastes. Leaders from industry, politics (European and national), and civil society discussed how to change the political vocabulary and the links between the private and the public spheres.

Richard von Weizsäcker, former President of Germany, called for the language of the economic and cultural policy to be brought together so that they were seen to be pursuing the same objectives. Louis Schweitzer, Chairman of Renault, argued that business ethics after the recession would have to be different and encompass a more inclusive sense of the relationship between culture, society and economic drivers. There was concern that neither the management structures of companies nor the representative structures of governments based on territories reflect the reality of the relationships among their clients, workers and voters – or have the flexibility to react to change creatively.

Openness became an abiding theme of the conference discussions: openness to new ideas, new identities and new people. Europe was seen as a tool and a metaphor, not just a set of institutions and specifically not just the political arrangements of the European Union. Roland Berger, head of a major management consultancy, argued for a balance that strengthened multiple identities, enjoying the characteristics of national cultures without losing the economies of scale that wider references bring. The biggest obstacle to future prosperity was seen as protectionism, not just of trade, but of borders. Europe is afraid of its diversity, former US Ambassador John Kornblum asserted, and keeps trying to legislate against it - with the result that people feel their lives are being destroyed by outsiders and politicians and global corporations no longer have even the vocabulary to talk to each other effectively. Europe, said Miklos Marschall of Transparency International, needs to behave more like a city than a nation state, and is desperately in need of the sort of transformational leadership that has turned round the fortunes of so many great cities in the last thirty years.

Europe must not hide behind its Union borders, shutting out those who need and deserve to take part. The tendency of the 27 member EU to call itself Europe, as if it covers all the continent is an unacceptable habit. The resulting policy to exclude the people of neighbouring countries as if all their young creative citizens are a major threat is deplorable.



We have to accept that migration, especially temporary migration, is inevitable if there is global trade and transport. We will not advance our own aspirations by stamping on those of others. Fortress Europe has to be replaced by a porous Europe, behaving more like a cell allowing movement through its outer membrane, than like a castle from the walls of which boiling oil is poured on anyone who comes too close. Twenty years after the tearing down of Berlin Wall it is a disgrace that there is an entire generation of young Europeans, throughout the Balkans, Anatolia and the lands west of Russia, who are without the right to travel freely. Mobility restrictions that set up the EU as a space of privilege undermine and show as empty rhetoric all the fine intentions that political figures sprinkle through their opening conference speeches. Such restrictions build up resentment, slow reform and prevent the development of skills. Culturally they are damaging, closing off the access to some of the most imaginative talent in Europe, and threaten to force an alienated Turkey into the arms of radical forces.

With 2008 designated as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, and 2009 to be European Year of Creativity and Innovation, all sides called for the resources and will to make the most of the opportunities that a cultural pillar for European development represents. This cultural paradigm, freed from the divisive assertions of the past, is also the key to including the areas that border Europe, whether to the east or along the southern shore of the European Union. The Europe of the late twentieth century needs to be redesigned to make it fit for the 'Erasmus generation', for whom mobility, flexibility and creativity are as natural as their use of the internet.

For culture to be a positive force, the mobility of people in all its diversity is crucial. Opportunities for young people and cultural operators to exchange ideas, to develop projects and participate in networks must not be limited to some member states of the European Union. National governments need to recognise that cultural interaction is as vital as free trade. Equally that mobility schemes cannot be left to the limited budgets of the European Commission. Promoting mobility must become a core responsibility of nation states. 'Responsibility starts with dreams', said Meglena Kuneva, the European Commissioner from Bulgaria, taking a line from W.B. Yeats. It is the belief that lies behind the conviction that development in Europe - political, economic and individual - requires creativity and innovation stemming from the cultural core of civil society.

The responsibility to which she referred is the urgent need to re-engage citizens in the process of constructing Europe through shared values. These values, Commissioner Kuneva said, can be distilled as 'prosperity, solidarity and liberty'. To achieve this, culture needs to be a key component in making Europe work for its citizens. Cultural Europe is composed of much more than national heritage. It includes one of the most dynamic economic sectors - that of the arts: a major source of employment and ideas generation.

Artists and their fellow professionals in the sector can be crucial in helping Europe design a new model for participatory democracy that engages the inhabitants of Europe on the basis of equality and social justice. Volker Hassemer, former Berlin Senator, wondered whether European governments have the mechanisms or the will to deal with civil society organisations which are not 'against' things but want to make a positive contribution. There was a call for shared values to replace social structures based on opposition, whether between media stereotypes, national governments or unions and industry. The cultural sector offers its ideas, resources, invention and people to help Europe out of economic recession and political stagnation.

After this third Berlin Conference, the A Soul for Europe initiative will change format, location and generation. It is multiplying so that the discussion can engage citizens throughout Europe, defined in its widest sense. Over the next two years the initiative will be devolved to many more cities – and implemented by civil society organisations instituted by the emerging generation of active leaders.

Simon Mundy, 2 December 2008