

“Pride is missing in Europe”

Pascal Bruckner

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The West has no shortage of reasons for guilt. Since the end of World War II, Europeans in particular have been consumed by repentance. But French writer and philosopher Pascal Bruckner argues that enough is enough. “It has become a pathology, and even an obstacle to fighting today’s atrocities. We must admit to our faults and crimes, but at the same time recognise we have overcome them.” According to Bruckner we should be proud and ready to defend ourselves and our values. “By doing so, we might stop dictatorial regimes that are continuously confronting us with the violent part of our past.” Bruckner’s latest book, ‘Le paradoxe amoureux’ about the paradox between passion and suffering, in love and society, has been published recently.

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ascal Bruckner is reluctantly optimistic about the future of the Middle-East. He even thinks that, under the right circumstances, the face of this area might change totally. “I am pleased the protest movement in Iran is emerging. A legitimate government of a country that has gone through an Islamic revolution, has been confronted with protests. That is unprecedented! For the first time in the history of Islam, God is not used to glorify obscurantism, but to propagate a more tolerant view on religion. For once, God has been invited by his followers to create more democracy and tolerance. Not a violent or cruel, but a sympathetic God. It is extremely important to continue supporting young Iranians in their fundamental struggle against election fraud”, Bruckner says during a visit to Brussels.

“Initially I supported the war in Iraq, but I regretted that later. The pleasure of seeing a horrible dictator overthrown was quickly tarnished by subsequent setbacks, including the nauseating disclosure of the systematic tortures, which could well constitute real war crimes, practised by American soldiers. Many crimes have been committed and mistakes made, after the invasion. “But I am hopeful now. There is some progress made in Iraq, Iran balances on the edge of ‘another’ form of democracy and there seem to be more opportunities for conditional peace between Palestinians and Israelis. The fact president Obama recognises the importance of Islam, has a very positive impact on the Islamic world and could lead to something better. We are not there yet, but I am sure the Middle-East won’t suffer eternally.” Bruckner emphasises that radical, cynical Muslim leaders in Gulf states like Abu Dabhi are leaving there isolated positions and starting to open up to the rest of the world. “This beneficial change does not occur in democracies, but in authoritarian, dictatorial countries. We should show sympathy for those developments openly, because, after ten dark years, they nourish optimism.” According to Bruckner, the way we deal with the Muslim world has to do mainly with how we see ourselves. “Under the influence of Lutheran protestantism we have allowed our past atrocities to be our guide, which is an extremely negative situation. We are living in a Christian culture of sin, which eventually will become a sin in itself. That is why a little optimism won’t hurt us.”

Europe has been haunted for half a century by the torment of repentance, reliving and remembering its past crimes: feudalism, colonialism, slavery, imperialism, fascism, and communism, a seemingly unending series of killing and plundering, culminating in two world wars. Of course, Europeans should have a fair amount of self-criticism, but they exaggerate in their collective feeling of guilt towards people and countries in other parts of the world. ‘Le sanglot de l’homme blanc’ (1983), a denunciation against the misplaced solidarity of the white man with the Third World, is according to many Bruckner’s most controversial book, but in his provocative and still relevant work ‘The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism’ (2006) he describes guilt using numerous superlatives: “This is the moment the white man understood his reign was over and his supremacy was crushed by the new regimes of decolonised countries. The European Union is relatively young, but already turning against itself by placing the enemy in the center and submitting to an eternal inquest.” Europe’s

one-way communication determines, in a negative sense, the way we ‘approach multicultural issues and give aid to developing countries’. As a result we won’t change ‘our’ soft attitude towards Israeli politics, and are left with political and cultural damage.”

New book

His new book ‘La paradoxe amoureux’ is about love. Just like his thesis in the 70s. “The title of my thesis, ‘Every body is accessible to everybody’, reflects the time-spirit. A number of forgotten writers from the 18th and 19th century have been rediscovered in the 60s and 70s of the last century.” Bruckner: “I will give you two extremes: Marquis De Sade and socialist and utopist Charles Fourier. The latter has had great influence on the thoughts of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels by introducing a new world order, an alternative for capitalism, where all people would have a chance to come to full advantage, sexually or otherwise. “In ‘Le nouveau monde amoureux’, Fourier created the utopia of some kind of universal friendship and sympathy between people, without taboos and restrictions, and based on mutual appeal.” Bruckner has always been fascinated by love. He seems to forget the beautiful surroundings in Brussels’ Jubelpark, the moment ‘Le paradoxe amoureux’ becomes the topic of conversation again. “Based on the changes marriage and

erotics underwent over the years, I address the instinctive resistance against all sorts of doctrines. It is about the paradox between passion and suffering, which are both connected to love.” Bruckner described the 60s and 70s in an article in l’Express magazine as an ‘angelic and at the same time perverted era free of venereal diseases.

“A Burqa is like a moving prison.”

“We are still suffering the consequences. In my new book, I draw the balance of this period in time, which started in the 17th century with a very significant sentimental revolution. Family life was all about the affection between the two parents and their children. After that, there have been all kinds of revolutions, such as the sexual revolution at the end of the 19th century. I think May 1968 (the period of protests and solidarity strikes against the establishment in the whole of France, ed.) was the last stage of that process. That’s all. In those days, the glorification of the body was a part of affection. Although the sexual revolution dates back to the end of the 19th century, this outburst of love felt like a liberation. This moment of innocence brought economic prosperity to the whole of Europe. Furthermore, formerly lethal diseases had become curable, thanks to the invention of anti-biotics, and the idea that desire was innocent prevailed.”

His hatred of the clergy originates from his school years with the Jesuits in Lyon, France. “In those days, they were described as pedagogues, but actually the only thing they did was teaching us religion. An aggressive and scrupulous, classic form of Catholicism, picturing protestants, Jews and orthodox believers as ‘mistakes’. The one and only truth came from Rome.” Did this make him a European, who, driven by guilt, behaved as a masochist dominated by a majority of people with different opinions? “Very strongly. On my father’s side I descend from protestant Dutchmen and Germans. A bad conscience is a heritage. The good thing is that we permanently ask ourselves how to bear our responsibilities. The bad thing is we may walk right into the trap of our own willingness. The separation line between a



good and a bad conscience is very thin. When I was young, I felt a lot of guilt, especially towards the Third World. I just had to carry that, they said."

New philosophers

During the mid-seventies Bruckner adopted the ideas of the so-called new philosophers, who criticised left-wing, arrogant philosophers, because they valued

collectivism and ideology more than the human individual. "My generation has underestimated Marxism, and slowly abandoned the communist ideology, until a final separation was established under the influence of Albert Camus and Raymond Aron. Anglo-Saxon intellectuals, whose ideas have been confirmed by the new philosophers, thought we were way behind in fathom this totalitarian phenomena. They began to understand that communist regimes did horrible things." Before he addresses the European feeling of guilt, Bruckner explains why the Vietnam war was the beginning of a period of military weakness for the Americans. "The war in Vietnam was lost, because American boys were forced to enlist into the army. Students protested, middle class families revolted, because they were afraid their children would die. America's trauma - it was the first time ever the world's best army was defeated - still stands, which might

be caused by the Pentagon's zero-casualty rule. There is less opposition against the war in Iraq, because of the deployment of professional soldiers. "The American trauma has nothing to do with repentance, which is a typical European characteristic, caused by the fact that our history goes back much further. The United States have committed many crimes, but never matched European genocides. Our bad conscience dates back to what happened during the crusades, the 'conquistas' in South America, slavery and imperialism. Europe used to be a continent of barbarians, brutes and missionaries, even the most decent countries have known and caused massacres, but in fact it is much more complicated than that." Europe should not look back in negativity alone and does not need to blush because of its history. Here is a civilisation which raised itself up from the apocalypse of World War II, representing today the peaceful marriage of strength and conscience - it may indeed walk with head held high, serving as an example to other nations. Nobody needs a European Union that is collectively consumed by guilt and because of that expresses solidarity to democrats and despots alike."

Bruckner is very disappointed by the lack of interest expressed by the Europeans for the 2009 European election, that was marked by a record low voter turnout. He emphasises that people from all over the world are eager to settle in Europe or the United States. "For example, Iranian democrats do not go to Russia, China or the Middle-East, as only the West offers them an opportunity to live in freedom and prosperity. And may I remind you, that Europe has abolished slavery and colonies, but the Chinese and Russians continue to suppress minorities. We have to admit to our faults and crimes, which is totally legitimate, but we must recognise we have overcome them if we do not want the spirit of penitence to stifle in us the spirit of resistance--to give us up with bound hands and feet to the fanatics and the despots who won't stop to point at our past." A problem is that there are communalities, but there is no European unity. "Brussels is not Europe's capital, but a production centre based on international standards for camembert cheese, milk, butter, bananas and pastries. One big economic market, but no political centre. During a cri-

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sis it all happens in London, Paris or Berlin, but seldom in Brussels. The new European president and a new European government will make things easier. But as long as Europe wants to lay back, it is still true what Henry Kissinger once said: 'There is no such thing as Europe, there is Sweden, Germany, France...'"

Muslims

Bruckner's thoughts about Muslims are controversial, to say the least. "Multiculturalism is the racism of the anti-racists", he once said. "Europe risks to degenerate into self-hate. Many people and politicians do not even think of questioning traditions of other peoples. As a result, they recognise traditional Muslims, who will never accept a Christian priest. A very interesting alliance between left-wing extremists and

fundamentalistic Muslims has occurred. It's my opinion that immigrants should become Europeans. They don't have to abandon their own traditions, but their predominant culture should be that of the country they intend to live in. The secular character of France, which has been imitated by many Turks and is now part of a law that states that the public domain must remain neutral to allow the peaceful co-existence of different religious groups, is recommendable.

The law that prohibits women from wearing veils in schools and during their performance as civil servants is a great success in France. Seventy percent of all female Muslims agree, because they consider the veil to be a sign of repression. I support president Sarkozy's plan to forbid women to wear a burqa: it's a prison made of fabric for women. A new law won't be necessary, though. Municipalities already have the right to determine that everybody has to show his or her face on the streets for security reasons.

The Anglo-Saxons do not understand the French attitude towards religious symbols. In Cairo, president Obama has said that we cannot dictate girls how to dress, but that is a very bad interpretation of French law. Europe is very tolerant and does not want to dictate its values to others. One cannot ask a Chinese, Iraqi or South African citizen to live like a Dutchman or a Frenchman, but when they want to live on European soil we may expect them to follow our values in essential issues. We are against polygamy, we consider man and woman to be equal and the law is the same for everybody. We should not allow any exceptions!"

Left-wing

From the bottom of his heart, Bruckner says: "Fortunately Ségolène Royal has not been chosen president of France, because left-wing politicians in France and Europe are in a state of confusion and total ideological chaos. Left-wing in France has died, and the socialist party is in an extremely bad shape. Therefore, I consider myself to be left-wing only from a cultural tradition. The only left-wing person I would trust is Dominique Strauss-Kahn, president of the International Monetary Fund.

Nicolas Sarkozy has chosen to pursue left-wing ideas, which is too bad in a country without any opposition. François Bayrou, a politician at the centre of the political spectrum, who took part in the 2007 presidential elections, is an idiot. They are killing each other. Left has to die again, before it will resurrect one day, but I am afraid the party will explode before that happens. If Sarkozy should decide to leave in 2012, there is nobody to lead the country."

The decline of the left-wing party has opened possibilities for the populist movement. See what happens in Italy and the Netherlands, says Bruckner. "Governments have been too indifferent towards religion and immigration and thus betrayed the message of Enlightenment: 'Tolerance, but at the same time intolerance against fanaticism. In the name of tolerance, governments indulge fanatic utterances, because they are from another culture than ours."

How does Pascal Bruckner see the future? "We can continue to be remorseful, slowly withdrawing ourselves from the world's stage. Or we are finally able to accept our historic responsibilities and confirm the respect we should have for

our standards and values. Our bad conscience is nothing but an alibi for not having to play a significant part in contemporary history. Pride is missing in Europe. It simply is a choice between the decline and resurrection of Europe." 🎓



Pascal Bruckner is a French philosopher and writer. After studies at the universities Paris I and Paris VII, and then at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, he became maître de conférences at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, and collaborator at the Nouvel Observateur. Bruckner began writing in the vein of the so-called new philosophers. He published 'Parias', 'Lunes de Fiel' (adapted to film by Roman Polanski) and 'The beauty stealers'. Among essays, 'Temptation of innocence', and, famously, 'The Tears of the White Man' (an attack on narcissistic and destructive policies intended to benefit the Third World), and more recently 'Tyranny of guilt'. His latest book 'Le paroxe amoureux' has been published recently. From 1992 to 1999, he was an active supporter of the Croatian, Bosnian and Kosovar causes against Serbian aggression. He supported the 1999 NATO bombings of Serbian forces led by Milosevic. In 2003, he supported the toppling of Saddam Hussein by the US forces but later criticised the mistakes of the American army and the use of torture in Abu Graib and Guantanamo. His views on multiculturalism have been internationally discussed.

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"The most terrible tyranny is which is carrying the mask of freedom."
— Jean-Siffrein Maury —