

Conférence d'Utrecht

Ladies and gentlemen,

Hitler once quipped: If you want to strike a democracy, strike on a Sunday. Using President Saakashvili's enormous gaffe as a pretext, Vladimir Putin invaded Georgia in the middle of August, at a time of the year when Americans and Europeans alike leisure on the beach. He then proceeded, by the same token, to annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia, threatening in one sweeping movement Ukraine, Moldavia, the Baltic States, Azerbaijan, and Turkey altogether. What a terrific lesson this little Southern Caucasian *blitzkrieg* offered about the reality of Europe: our political leaders were left stunned and helpless, upset at having been recalled from their vacations by Moscow; the acting President of the European Union had to leave his wife's luxury estate on the Riviera in a hurry to go negotiate a botched agreement with his Russian counterpart Medvedev which virtually granted absolute power in the region to the former Red Army. The countries of the Union – all except Poland and the Baltic republics – were flabbergasted to discover that Russia is an expansionist empire which, as Vladimir Putin himself readily confessed, rejected Western values and our human rights. What a pitiful revelation: our great Eastern neighbor, firmly set on its several hundred billion dollar throne, has but utter contempt for our democracy and our institutions, knows no language but that of coercion, and proclaims itself ready to shut down the gas pipelines if we dared protest.

Modern Europe, as you know, was founded on the rejection of war, on the “never more” catchphrase: no more destroyed cities, no more exterminated populations, no more mass destructions. Europe after 1945 was not born, like the USA, out of a collective oath that says everything is possible. It was born out of exhaustion after so many bloodsheds. It took the total disaster of the 20th century for the Old World to convert to virtue, like an aging whore suddenly going from debauchery to bigotry. Had the horrors of two world wars not happened, there would never have been such an aspiration for peace, that is an aspiration to rest. European democracy resembles the kind of convalescence that certain people, in the aftermath of too rowdy a past, force themselves to observe when they lose the taste for devastation: this is a small-footed democracy, based on constructive modesty. This is all that's left when all other dreams have been abandoned: a space of great diversity, where it's good to live, to achieve, to enrich oneself, if possible, in the vicinity of culture's highlights. True, such an ambition is an admirable one, since this type of government limits the waste in human

lives, works without violence, and abstains of all proselytism in terms of human rights. All this would make for a perfect picture if we lived in a time of great serenity, in a world entered in “perpetual peace” at last. Yet one is struck by the contrast between the idyll Europeans believe themselves to live in – a dream world of rights, dialogue, respect, and tolerance – and the tragedy that befalls the world around them: an autocratic Russia, an aggressive Iran, a torn Middle East, an unstable Africa. Europe, indeed, no longer believes in evil, only in misunderstandings that can be amicably settled. It is done with History, that nightmare it had so much trouble waking up from, once in 1945 and then again in 1989, after the fall of the Wall; it protects itself against this poison by building around itself a fortress of norms, rules, and procedures, proclaiming high and loud that it has no adversaries, only partners, that it’s friends with everyone, tyrants and democrats alike. Ours is the only continent in the world where military expenses diminish on a regular basis, as if our sheer good will were enough to prevent anyone from attacking us.

What’s more, Europe has been haunted for half a century now by the torments of attrition. Mulling over its past crimes – slavery, imperialism, fascism, communism –, it sees its own history as nothing but a litany of massacres and lootings that led to two world wars – in other words, to enthusiastic suicide. True, Europe has been the foremost herald, since the Conquistadores, of the alliance of progress and cruelty, of technological power and aggression, it’s lived through centuries of bloody saturnalias. Yet, because it begot monsters, it also begot the theories that enable us to reflect upon and to destroy those monsters. Taking over from the Arabs and the Africans, it instituted the transatlantic slave trade, but it also was the only one to theorize abolitionism and to put an end to slavery, before any other nation. It committed the worst, and gave itself the means to eradicate it. The peculiarity of Europe is a paradox brought to its most extreme manifestation: from feudal arbitrariness springs the democratic aspiration; from clerical oppression springs the freedom of religion and secularism; from the conflict between nations springs the dream of a supranational community; from revolutionary ideologies springs the anti-totalitarian movement. Like a jailer who at once throws you in a cell and gives you the keys to unlock it, Europe brought to the world at once despotism and liberty. It sent its soldiers, its missionaries and its merchants win over faraway lands, and it invented anthropology, which is a way of seeing oneself through the eyes of someone else and a way of seeing the others without prejudice, a way of getting away from oneself to get closer to what’s alien. This is the contradiction that was fatal to the colonial adventure: subjecting continents to the rules of a Métropole which, on the other hand, taught them the idea of nation and the self-determination of peoples. When they

claimed their independence, the colonized countries did nothing more than turning back against their masters the very rules that they had been taught by them. A civilization that is capable of the worst atrocities and the most wonderful achievements cannot see itself through the sole prism of its guilty conscience: not only genocides are not a Western specificity, far from it, but it's the West that introduced the conceptualization of certain crimes as crimes against humanity, it's the West that, after 1945, rejected its own barbarity and gave that word its specific meaning, taking the chance that the accusation would fall back on its shoulders. The peculiarity of Europe is that it's not blind to its own shadows; it knows – all too well – its own pathologies and the frailty of the guardrails that keep it safe from its own ignominy. Such clear-eyed view of itself, in its most extreme form, forbids Europe to call for a crusade of Good versus Evil, but rather to a fight between the preferable and the detestable, as Raymond Aron so shrewdly noted. Europe builds itself within the very doubt that negates it and looks at itself through the unforgiving eye of a judge, submitting itself to constant reassessment. Such is the example set forth by the Old World: no people can evade its duty to think against itself.

But the suspicion that weighs on our most splendid achievements is always likely to degenerate into self-hatred and easy defeatism. Which would leave us with only one obligation: to repay our debts, endlessly, and atone for everything we stole from humanity since the beginning. See how the wave of attrition sweeps like a plague over our latitudes and especially over the main protestant and catholic churches: it's the best of all things, a salutary awakening, provided we admit that the reverse might be true and that other cultures, elsewhere, other creeds recognize their mistakes. Contrition cannot be for some people only; moral purity cannot be granted as a moral retribution to those who claim to have been humiliated and persecuted. Too many countries, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Latin America, confuse self-criticism with the will to find a convenient scapegoat that would explain their misery and underdevelopment: it's never their fault, always someone else's, either the Great American Satan or the small European Satan.

This is precisely the problem of Europe today: one does not make greater politics with guilt and weariness, especially in a world that is more and more threatening. In the name of the best intentions, Germany – that is to say, Auschwitz – was heralded as a metaphor of Europe, forever branded with the mark of Cain, weighted down by its insurmountable infamy. Yet there is no reason, to start with, for Germany to be condemned to eternal shame, since it regained its rank among the nations, after going through an exemplary process of self-examination and introspection: the Jewish community in Germany is now the third strongest in Europe, after France and Great-Britain. There is no such thing as a hereditary transmission

of the status of victim, nor of that of victimizer. The duty of remembering does not entail the automatic punishment or corruption of grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Here's what we've learned in the last fifty years: There are no innocent states or peoples, including among those which appeared only recently on the stage of History, in the Third World. The difference is, some states are capable of admitting it and looking straight at their own barbarity, while others use the persecutions of the past to find excuses for their own current indignity.

From Africa, from the Middle East, the whole world is knocking on Europe's door at a time when it remains bogged down in remorse and uneasiness. Subjected to the double aggression of hyperterrorism and the Russian empire, threatened by Iran that promises to unleash hell if it opposes its nuclear program, Europe is also at risk of being blackmailed for its faults by its enemies who intend to weaken it morally, the better to control and divide it. This was made obvious by the sad case of the Prophet caricatures, when Brussels, rather than standing by Denmark and Norway whose embassies were being burned to the ground, shamefully forsook them and simply sent Javier Solana on a tour of the Arab world as a mea-culpa salesman. The ghost of capitulation haunts our old continent, all the more so as Europe naively thinks that it foreshadows the end of History and that all the peoples of the world will passionately embrace our political customs and our individualism. Not only Europe should not feel embarrassed by its history, it can draw a legitimate pride for having successfully overcome centuries of bloodbaths, massacres, and civil wars. A civilization that came close to the abyss on so many occasions, and each time managed to rise up again, recovered from the apocalypse of World War II, and now embodies the happy union between power and conscience, can bear itself proudly and serve as an example to other nations. It is high time, therefore, for Europe to take up arms again, mentally and militarily, so that it is prepared for the confrontations to come. What is now to be called for is nothing less than an intellectual revolution, if we do not want the spirit of repentance, eventually, to end up stifling our spirit of resistance, leaving us prey to fanatics and tyrants.