

Interview with Bronisław Geremek

'It is far easier to integrate economies and administrations than to unite memories. The new Member States have a different view of the past'



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Bronisław Geremek was a Polish historian and a member of the European Parliament.

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Bronisław Geremek was born in 1932 in Warsaw. He spent several of his childhood years in the Warsaw ghetto, out of which his mother and him were smuggled in 1943. In 1954, he graduated from the Faculty of History in Warsaw University and then completed his postgraduate studies at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. A specialist in medieval history, his scholarly work was focused on the history of the poor and underworld groups in Europe.

Initially a militant of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), Bronisław Geremek withdrew from the communist party after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. A prominent figure of the political opposition in the 1970s, he joined the Gdańsk workers' protest movement in August 1980 and became one of the advisers of the self-governing trade union Solidarność.

An unremitting advocate of the enlargement of the EU to its Central European neighbours and a passionate actor in the European construction, Bronisław Geremek carried on with his political commitments after 1989. He served as a member of the Polish Parliament (Sejm), as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 2000 (signing in 1999, the treaty under which his country joined NATO), as European MP from 2004 to 2008 and, since 2006, had been chairing the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe.

We met him in the spring of 2008, at his office in the European Parliament and were profoundly saddened to learn about his accidental death on 13th July 2008.

What is Central Europe?

Central Europe is nostalgia for Europe. It was the dream of peoples who felt they had been cut off from their natural environment, from European culture and all that it represents. The dream of Central Europe was simply about finding Europe again.

What has become of this dream?

It's disappearing, because it was a dream of liberation. Now that Central Europe is an integral part of the European Union, it's a dream that no longer inspires. On May 1st 2004 we had the feeling of seeing our dream come true: *here we are, back inside Europe!* When the European flag was hoisted over Piłsudski Square in Warsaw, at midnight, it was a highly symbolic moment. But only for us, the countries coming into Europe. There was no moment of joy and happiness on the western side.

Is there a new European dream today to replace the one from the time Europe was divided into two blocs? I'm far from sure...

You believe it is important to look at European identity without taking geographical borders as the starting point: what about thinking of Europe beginning with cities?

European urbanity is a factor for movement in the continent's history. In traditional economies during the Middle Ages, at the dawn of the modern period, cities were at the heart of thought, development and technological progress in Europe. I am myself a man of the city; I love cities! But to claim that the cities made Europe would be to get reality back-to-front: Europe is also profoundly rural.

What size and clout the rural population has does not come exclusively from the '*new Europe*', or in other words Eastern Europe. From this point of view, although long enshrined, the difference between East and West has

sprung up more dramatically over the last quarter of a century. I remember when I first came to France, to the Massif Central, in 1956: I found a world which was very similar to that of rural Poland. The difference between the two Europes was thrown into stark relief by enlargement: on the one side, a country like Poland where nearly 40% of the population lives from farming and, on the other, countries where only a residual rural population remains.

Therefore, while seeing cities as of primary importance as a motor for change, we must not forget that contemporary Europe is also made out of the persistence of the past. The history of Europe is also the history of rural societies.

But can the countryside still be Europe's future?

Thinking about this future, I have no doubt that rural depopulation in Europe is irreversible. Europe has become urban, and the new Member States will only have shifted the balance for a little while...

The issue is whether we view this rural past as a burden or, on the contrary, as an asset. I think that the CAP, now coming to an end and under fire from all quarters, was in fact a very wise policy. It safeguarded our heritage while carrying out the necessary modernisation. We must preserve our cultural landscape, the landscape which was shaped by history. Otherwise, Europe will lose its identity.

Why is it so important?

Europe, together with the other continents, is entering an era in which environmental challenges will harness all our energies, all the new technologies, in an effort to preserve the human space and the human race. There is a growing awareness of the need to defend natural areas. In our countries, in Eastern Europe, there used to be no such awareness: poli-

tically, there were no 'Greens' and socially, people had little ecological consciousness. There was also an ideological aspect to this indifference: for the communists, the natural environment was not a benchmark for the human condition.

In 1989 or 1990, I was present at a meeting between the Polish President, Lech Wałęsa, and the President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel. The meeting was due to take place in a mountain refuge on the border between Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. What struck me was that the subject of discussion was the environment. Our path was littered with destruction - forests that were only a shadow of their former selves, over-industrialisation, a sadness of the landscape around us...

Times have changed. If I had to find the simplest definition of the European idea, I would say that it now revolves around three things: freedom (in politics, in the economy and in life), peace, and then a very special awareness of environmental issues.

What, for you, are the major challenges facing your country today?

First of all, an economic challenge. Poland must work out how to play its full part in the promising venture represented by European integration. It is already involved, but largely on account of an initial phase of relocations which have favoured Poland because of its low-cost labour force. And some companies are already leaving the country to look elsewhere. Polish people must now start looking for ways to be innovative.

The second challenge is a cultural one: it is far easier to integrate economies and administrations than to unite memories. The new countries have a different view of the past and different memories. For us, the First World War brings to mind not so much the endless cemeteries of Verdun as a return to national independence. The beginning of the Second World War, on September 1st or 3rd 1939, is recognised throughout Europe.

But September 17th – when Soviet forces, with the agreement of Hitler’s Germany, entered Polish territory – or the occupation of the Baltic republics by the Red Army, are less familiar in the West. And this has consequence. If we want the EU to grow stronger, this reunification of memories must make headway. Otherwise, there is a risk that the new countries will stop looking outside their own borders, that we will witness a return to the national. We do not have much experience of instructive communication or dialectical relations between the European and national levels. We have stepped into a institutional and psychological universe that was already shaped. And the dangers of this situation concern all the countries of the Union, as we are now bound together...

Isn’t this unification of memories already embedded in the European integration process?

What do the Treaties say about culture? That we are going to preserve ‘the national nature of cultures’, out of fear that European unification might be achieved to the detriment of individual national features. Not a word about supporting European culture in its unitarian dimension.

There is a danger of a drift to nationalism in our countries, mirroring the same drift and the temptations of economic patriotism in some of the older EU Member States. If we are to build a common identity, both must be vanquished. In day-to-day terms, that means, for instance, common history textbooks.

Returning to the subject of cities, could you tell us about Warsaw, the city where you spent most of your life?

Changes over the last couple of decades have been nothing short of spectacular. Sometimes I have no idea where I am in Warsaw! My city is the one of my pre-war memories, and also of the post-war years when it was being

rebuilt. Now, Warsaw has become one of the most modern of Europe’s large cities with its urban sprawl, mixed, modernist architecture, but with no guiding vision, which is regrettable. But – it’s still my city!

The first thing I like about Warsaw is its human face: a newly formed city with no history; a city made up of families who mostly come from small towns, from rural economic and social horizons. There are very few original Varsovians, I’m something of a dinosaur! This makes it a city without deep historical roots, but its population is volubly happy to be there and to be living together.

And then, Varsovians are innovative and open-minded, and are well-disposed to modernisation. They are not sad or tired, and have a sense of humour – very little melancholy, perhaps a hint of nostalgia from time to time, but it never lasts long... And lastly, Warsaw is a young people’s city, with major university centres. All these things make it an attractive city, even though it’s not as beautiful as, for instance, Kraków.

Let’s look at what’s happening in another major Polish city, Łódź, where the industrial premises founded by Izrael Poznański have recently been converted into a shopping centre. What do you think about this conversion?

The Poznański family was one of Poland’s great Jewish families, with connections everywhere – once, in a large central Asian country, I met the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, née Poznański!

The Łódź phenomenon is not unique to Poland. This ‘Poland’s Manchester’ belongs to that long European tradition, starting in the early 16th century, in which large employers built housing for their workers right next to the factories. It was an element of an exploitative relationship, but also a factor in shaping the cultural and material landscape of European cities.

The present-day appearance of Łódź is very enticing, very exotic. Those huge buildings where people worked and which now, after renovation, do have a certain beauty, were the scene of extreme poverty. You should see Wajda's film *The Promised Land*, about early industrialisation in the 19th century. Made in the 1960s, it was shot in unaltered factory surroundings, which were still working. 19th century working conditions had persisted into the middle of the 20th.

Is poverty a matter for Europe?

I think John Rawls, the great liberal thinker, was right when he said that all governments can be judged by how they improve the life of the poorest, what he called 'maximising the social minimum'. These are the words of a liberal: if you always think of liberalism as a dirty word, it is easy to overlook this side, associating freedom with the drive for justice.

A French priest, Fr Brezinski, argued that the right of the poor to be helped was a fundamental right. This idea, that poverty is a violation of human rights, is a very important one.

We saw this extreme poverty in the former communist countries when the transition process began, for example when the large state farms in north and north-east Poland were closed – or privatised – and took away farm workers' jobs, with unemployment being handed down from one generation to the next. The European Union should face this. There should be a greater awareness of poverty inside Europe, not only among Africans or Asians.

'Mercy and the Gallows'¹: do these two words still sum up Europeans' attitudes towards the poor?

We live in a radically different world to the Middle Ages. But when I open the newspaper and read that a young man from Mali jumped in a river and died of a heart attack while trying to run away from the police who were coming to expel him from the European Union, I have the feeling that this «gallows» aspects persists in our institutions.

What Braudel called 'the ferocity of the bourgeoisie'...

Braudel, who was one of my teachers, said something else that has been valuable to me in my political life. He said that for humans to be happy, they need three things: freedom, the market, and a little fraternity. A Pole, of course, would say 'a little solidarity', but it boils down to the same thing... Faced with mass immigration – which brings disorder to some Member States and sometimes outstrips their capacity for absorption – there is a tendency in the European Union to respond with repressive arrangements. It is shocking that camps for illegal immigrants are even being thought about!

Pity also means human degradation. Philanthropy is sometimes more a matter of the donor seeking his own benefit, seeking to get closer to God, than a real feeling of solidarity with the poor. The person receiving assistance is sometimes treated as an object. There is an ugly face to philanthropy, expressing contempt for the poor it is helping. And there is the hostility of the person being helped. Psychological attitudes don't change...

Of course there are fewer cases of acute suffering, of outbreaks of absolute deprivation in Europe today. But we continue to treat poverty with a mix

1 In *Mercy and the Gallows: Europe and the poor from the Middle Ages to the present day*, published in Poland in 1978, Bronisław Geremek analyses the contradictory feelings aroused by the poor, from the beggars of the Christian west to those excluded from today's affluent societies.

of repressive measures and condescension. I do not believe that we have yet found the right way to deal with the problem of human poverty. Maybe it's impossible. We should see this «mercy-gallows» tandem as a question that should make us, the people of the 21st century, think.

When talking about the rural world, you mentioned the persistence of the past, but what will happen to all these people who are stuck where they are, having been made redundant from Europe's ageing factories?

You now have to go to China to find the working class. The European working class labours under different problems, and it is much smaller. My belief is that the 19th century working class – which is where the concept was born –, the Manchester proletariat described by Friedrich Engels, no longer exists here.

Dramatic changes are under way, which I admit I don't fully understand: Europe seems to have stopped making things. And it seems to be happy to think other people will make them instead: the Chinese make enough shoes, so the Italians don't need to anymore. It could be seen as a kind of globalisation-driven division of labour. India has great poverty but is also at ease with the most sophisticated services in the world. The average American or South African company's accounts can be done in India via phone or internet.

Production used to be the essence of life for the majority of people. Not anymore. What should we do? How can we live without producing?

The production of value cannot be reduced to producing tangible objects, can it?

Of course you can produce other things: services, intelligence, technologies and so on, but it's still an enormous change, not only economic but cultural too. It is a psychological issue that goes much further than just

economics. If we are so baffled by globalisation, it's because it gives us surprises of this kind.

I'm enough of a realist not to get angry about history as it will play out. I'm not making any Panglossian claims that we live in the best of all possible worlds, but – because it is what is happening to us – I would say that we must think about how to adapt to the new demands of the world around us. I'm not at all sure that we yet know how to do it, but the European Union is certainly part of the answer.

When the founding fathers laid down the foundations of European integration, they probably couldn't imagine the challenges that would arise half a century later. European integration, as launched by the Treaty of Rome, remains however Europe's best tool for dealing with the century's challenges: globalisation, structural change – everything this century can throw at us by way of dangers and opportunities...



