

Interview with Andrei Pleșu

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Andrei Pleșu was born in Bucharest in 1948.

After studying Humanities in Bucharest, Bonn and Heidelberg, he became the follower of Constantine Noica, whose semi-clandestine lectures he attended in Păltiniș. Banned during the last months of the Communist regime, he was invited to join the government after the 1989 revolution and was Minister of Culture for two years; he was also, between 1997 and 1999, Minister of foreign affairs.

Andrei Pleșu teaches philosophy at Bucharest University and publishes regularly in the review *Dilema Vece* of which he is a founding member. He is also the Rector of the *New Europe College*, a multidisciplinary institute of higher education created in 1994 and established on Strada Plantelor in an elegant neo-classical house it shares with the Swiss embassy.

Alexandre Mirlesse met him there on the eve of the 2007 summer holiday.

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Interview conducted for *Notre Europe*'s research program on european identity, within the frame of which Alexadre has embarked upon a long trip across Europe.

A word of caution to the champions of growth and European prospective thinking: you may find the perusal of this, our interview with Romanian philosopher Andrei Pleșu, disturbing. “Europe, he says, is not designed for speed”; so don’t be surprised to find more in the following pages about melancholy than about the Lisbon Strategy; more about hikes than low-cost flights. Through the words of Andrei Pleșu Eastern Europe speaks to her Western sister, calls on her to ponder her past, to do away with haste and headlong rush and allow herself time for analytical detachment.

For in truth, East and West Europeans do not live either by the same clock or the same rhythm. Certainly, “normalisation” is underway in the East: as the effects of the free competition principle begin to be felt, the relationship to time changes, well... by the minute. Once virtually unknown, stress – efficiency’s unavoidable counterpart – has become the common lot of millions of city dwellers. But the travellers who roamed Europe this summer were not fooled: the trail from Brussels to Bucharest is still a journey back in time.

There are several possible responses to such a gap. We could settle for a “two-speed Europe”; or hope that the twin effects of economic growth and structural funding will soon make good the new Member States’ “backwardness”. This should not stop us from looking, under Andrei Pleșu’s discerning guidance, into how such an “asymmetry of experience” could benefit a Europe which, lurching from “breakdowns” to “kick starts”, has yet to find her cruising speed. If there is to be a tempo suited to all Europeans, it will emerge from a fruitful tension between these two temporalities, the oriental and the occidental: time indeed may have come for an enlarged Union to make Augustus’ motto her own: *festina lente*, make haste slowly.

Can we speak of a “European identity”?

I think on the contrary that it is time to pause, to stop speaking about it in the hyperbole currently in favour. Much has been said about Europe already, much has been written; the original *nucleus* has been enlarged. Now, whatever happens, there will be a break before the next enlargement, if it takes place. Under these circumstances an exercise in silence might help.

Besides, what has been said was not terribly imaginative. Some words appear too often!

So you think, like Hungarian writer Peter Esterhazy, that people should be fined for using expressions like “return to Europe”, “common house”, “European values”?

Oh! I have heard better: “*A soul for Europe*”! It was the theme of a conference recently organised by some Germans. They like that sort of schmaltz ...

But, to be quite candid, it isn’t just a few similar words but also the same themes that keep popping up...

Which ones?

Before we go any further let one thing be clear: these themes are *per se* utterly honourable. What actually shocks me is the way they are treated.

Firstly, of course, we find the famous ‘*values*’. Ah! Values! Culture! Heritage! They never fail to adorn the end of speeches, but you can’t help feeling that they are not the heart of the matter – rather some kind of flourish, so to speak, the *Rococo* of political discourse.

I was recently disturbed by something Angela Merkel said on this subject: “*Europe is not a Christian club, Europe is a club of values*”. As though there were some primary contradiction between Christianity and values! If she had said: “*Europe is not a Christian club, Europe is a ecumenical club*” or “*Europe is not a club of madmen, Europe is a club of values*” – that would have been logical. But, as it stands, her sentence suggests a serious lack of understanding of values, Christianity and Europe.

Any more?

Yes! The second required theme: the well rehearsed *“What can the East bring to the West?”*. You have now joined the Club and we, Westerners, wonder – in the friendliest possible way, but no less persistent for that – what you could bring to our organisation. And then, everybody chimes in: values! Local traditions! Culture!

I am sick and tired of this discourse. If you want my opinion on values and on what the East has to offer, here it is: In any case we shall bring you our vices!

We are going to bring you a certain historical lassitude. Yes, we are weary. But this weariness can also become a virtue, for Europe has forgotten how to look tired: she is too active, too dynamic, she is forever talking of the future, making plans. And yet, Europe is also a past – and the East might be able to bring her some perspective distance, a measure of calm, of analytical silence. This is as necessary to her as the Western citizen’s dynamism.

Can these two Europes understand each other?

I hope they can. But right now, there are problems in bringing them together. And I don’t think anybody is to blame for that situation. The last decades have erected awesome barriers between East and West, an asymmetry in experience, in mentality, in openness. We can be polite to each other, pretend to get on: but real dialogue is hardly possible.

Let me give you an example. As you know, under communist rule, some exiled Romanian writers were banned in Romania: Cioran and Eliade, for instance. After 1989, Romanians were at last able to publish and read their works: there was a flurry of translations and publications of these writers. Meanwhile, in the West, there was a great deal of concern expressed because two writers who had had a far-right involvement in their youth enjoyed a “suspect” success!

I can understand such concerns. But it must be understood that Cioran was not banned by the Communists because he was a former member of the Iron Guard but because he was too pessimistic. It had nothing to do with his far-right youth! Under Communism sadness was a political vice. One had to be positive, looking to the future, to the Party. Now, Cioran was

unforgivably tragic. As for Eliade, he was banned because he was interested in the history of religion – in an atheist country. The criteria for banning them were not any more political than the criteria for their reinstatement.

I understand Westerners’ sensitivity and qualms – but I hope they will understand our criteria, which are completely different, because the situation is completely different.

Your doctoral thesis, presented in Romania thirty years ago and soon to be translated into French is entitled *“Picturesque and Melancholy”*. Yet isn’t the “asymmetry” you just referred to quite picturesque in fact? Is there not a pleasure in travelling, an art of travel specific to Europe and more readily accessible since borders vanished?

Personally, I hate travelling. I hate travel places, airports, stations. I am slow and melancholy, I do not like movement, I prefer to sit still – it’s my “Turkish” side. Sure, the medics who look after me are horrified by my sedentary nature. But when the guy that brought us jogging died at 62 during a jog, I felt personally vindicated!

This notwithstanding let me answer your question with a quote from George Steiner who, in a very fine text on “the idea of Europe”, writes that Europe is the only continent in the world where one can travel on foot. It is not possible anywhere else! Brancusi for instance left Romania and covered all the distance from his native town to Paris on foot, like a young man set to conquer the capital.

Europe is not designed for speed.

Ulysse de Marsillac, a French traveller visiting Bucharest in the 1850s left behind memoirs in which he writes: “Bucharest has the rare gift to satisfy both our desire for civilisation and freedom”. Do you think Romania is still “exotic” to its European visitors?

No, I don’t think so. It was the case until the beginning of the 20th century, when Bucharest shocked the Western traveller with the paradox of remarkable evidence of civilisation and culture in the immediate proximity of barbarism.

But your quote reminds me of another traveller, roving around Greece at about the same time. He reported meeting in the mountains some kind of bearded and terrifying monk, primitive to the point of near-bestiality. From the monster's mouth, a question: "*Where do you come from?*" Confused and close to panic, he answers: "*I come from France*". And the monster enquires in French: "*Indeed! And how is Monsieur Voltaire?*"

The contrast between the brutish apparition and the Voltaire reference gave him a feeling of unmitigated exoticism. And that is fairly typical of South-Eastern Europe: You meet people there who have an extraordinary breadth of knowledge and all the complexes of people in small countries.

Which complexes have you got in mind?

Inferiority complexes. As Cioran says: "A small country's pride is always wounded¹".

Are the region's intellectuals still "hung up"?

One day, Mircea Eliade told me about his early days in Paris. There, he met Georges Dumézil who asked him what his field was. Eliade answered: "*the history of religions*". Dumézil was surprised: "*You know, that's rather a lot. I, for instance, have specialised in the Indo-European sources of religion – and that's more than enough.*" Then they got into conversation. Two hours later, Dumézil exclaimed: "*But you know everything!*" and Eliade replied: "*Sir, that's how it should be*".

There you have the inferiority complex of intellectuals from the East. They feel obliged to be more than they are, to know more than is possible or necessary in order to face the competition of the metropolis – this quality yields great assets and great failings.

Which are?

The major asset, in a rich and powerful mind like Eliade's, is the ability to achieve outstandingly encyclopaedic knowledge; the major failing, in lesser beings, is a staggering amateurism. You look like you know every

¹ Exact quote: «The pride of a person born within a small culture is always hurt»

thing; you are interested in everything, but there is no professionalism; you play some jolly music that will soothe the ear. This dilettantism may well be endearing but it lacks depth, stability, *Gründlichkeit*.

Constantin Noica was Cioran and Eliade's friend: he could have gone into exile like them towards the end of the 1940s but he did not. When we asked him why not, at the end of his life, Noica answered: "if I had gone to the West as a philosophy professor, I could have found some minor detail in the history of philosophy in which I could have specialised, because it has all been covered over there. I would have had to devote my life to some minor observation of Aristotle's; whereas here, where everything has yet to be done, I can just *read* Aristotle."

The pleasure, the impure freedom to be able to read Plato, to "walk on the broad avenues", as he said, and not just in the narrow streets – that has been the great opportunity of my intellectual life. But it is a double edged sword: the mobilising sensation, on the one hand, that everything is still to be done coexists with, on the other hand, the impression of being left on the margins.

And what were you angling for when you created the *New Europe College*? Did you find a halfway house between specialisation and the encyclopaedic approach?

Essentially, I wanted to create a place for the normalisation of intellectual life. Before 1989, you could only do research at the State's bidding; you could not follow up your own projects, there was no cross-disciplinary approach. I wanted there to be a place where fellows would be free to pursue their own projects – subject to one compulsory rule: weekly meetings to exchange ideas.

Is that what makes your college "European"?

Yes. I think the danger for contemporary Europe is the extraordinary isolation of the different faculties – or their homogenization in some vague technological ideology.

Exchanges of ideas are at the core of the *College*'s existence: we hold a weekly seminar where specialists from very different fields – theologians,

archaeologists, political scientists, all the humanities in their broadest possible sense – meet and must address subjects relevant to everyone in their own branch, “cross-disciplinary” as they say now. This forces everyone to look further afield, beyond their own obsessions or scientific priorities and to give their attention to other disciplines, other projects, other ideas.

What would be, for you, the ideal education for a European?

To answer this, I shall quote Noica again. He used to say: I think it would be crucial to go through school again between the age of 30 and 35, because when you go to school you are obliged to do chemistry, geography and you get bored. To redo it when you are grown up, read again a geography text book, is to marry encyclopaedic knowledge with the strength of one’s maturity. This could give Europe intellectual breadth and enable Europeans to recover their openness and tolerance – these famous “values” which hitherto have not gone much beyond rhetoric.

I would therefore suggest that our institutions organise in European cities public classes open to everybody, for two or three years, in all fields. This opening of minds to all comers – utopian though it is – could become a font of wisdom and fresh air.

From the picturesque to the melancholy: Do you think this mood is typically European?

Maybe. I confess that I could say melancholy is a mood typical of Europe, whereas I would not say that the mood typical of America or typical of Africa is melancholy. But I associate it more closely with *Mitteleuropa*, which, with its mix of peoples and its colourful history is melancholy’s home territory.

Melancholy is Europe’s post-imperial face. Europe was born as the epiphenomenon of an Empire, the Roman Empire. Ever since, there have been post-imperial periods in Europe. These are periods, like Alexandrinism, when the exhaustion of values is accompanied by a feeling of emptiness. It is this post-classical experience which gives some parts of Europe this melancholy hue.

You mention *Mitteleuropa*; as against that, Cioran wrote: “there are only three kinds of sadness: Russian, Hungarian and Portuguese”.

Don’t take that literally. But I agree that there is a melancholy specific to each people and that some are stronger than others. Peoples, like humans, are not equally melancholy!

Conversely, do some peoples have a greater sense of humour than others?

There is humour everywhere in Europe – but here it takes on a particular shade born of its historical experience.

The “*haz de necaz*”...

That’s it. Or as they said in Jewish communities, *trotzdem lachen*: laugh regardless. It is the Ghetto’s laughter: the situation is tragic but let’s laugh all the same.

One more word on melancholy: what the European Union lacks is precisely that: some form of melancholy. Today’s Europe is all forward looking: it formulates a model then sprints head long to achieve it. That’s what drove Vladimir Bukowsky to say: Now, instead of the USSR, we have the EU; instead of Moscow, Brussels; and still the same discourse: thrusting, optimistic, hell-bent on a golden future.

You agree with him?

Of course, this assertion is over the top. But it remains the case that EU discourse, what the European Commission says, convivial and effective though it is, has no time for thoughtfulness, melancholy.

On this subject, I want to put in another word for Eastern Europe and the contribution it could make. There is a very mysterious passage in Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians, quoted by Carl Schmitt and studied by the Romanian Theodore Paleologue.

² Romanian expression which translates literally as “laugh at misfortune”

According to this passage, there is a moment as the Apocalypse approaches, when the speed of evolution accelerates. And when the end of the world is nigh, somebody or something is needed to slow down the rate of the falling away, to hold up a little this inevitable course. And this something is referred to by Paul as the *Catechon* (κατεχων): the restrainer, the delayer, that which resists, holds things back

From a rationalist point of view, the types in this category are not attractive: not progressive but rather conservative: they lag behind, somehow. But at times when history accelerates, a *Catechon* is useful. And I think Eastern Europe is going to be able to play that part, in a world where everything is moving in a clear direction, in an outwardly dynamic and more and more vital way: perhaps the rhythms of that part of Europe are going to succeed in slowing down this evolution, in holding back the horse before it bolts.

Does research on Europe have a privileged field?

Europe is, I believe, essentially and originally the Mediterranean space. Saint Augustine was born in North Africa before becoming one of the founding fathers of Christianity in Europe!

All that goes on in the Maghreb is nourishing for the European mindset. Europe has radiated and also ingested some Mediterranean quality which suffuses the Maghreb right down to its cooking. North Africa is also European. That's where cultures and traditions mix: they presided over the birth of Europe and may well also sustain its future.

That is how Europe was born: the Roman Empire was in ruins and in poured the Barbarians, all over Europe, shaping something quite new. Europe is the combination of the traditions that survived the fall of Rome and the dark, hysterical and barbarian vitality of the nomadic invasions. History can repeat itself.

Where would you seek traces of the barbarian inheritance in contemporary Europe?

In the typology, the temperament – with its plusses and its minusses. In Europe, there is still a freshness that is quite barbarian, a certain absence

of routine – and also a measure of resistance to institutions, especially in the East.

However, a united Europe finds its expression first and foremost in common institutions...

True, but Eastern Barbarians find it hard to adjust to that. In the East, people tend to be autonomous, institutions have no prestige. The State, the institution: both are suspect. In order to survive it is advisable to avoid them. That's one of the problems of our integration into the European Union.

By way of conclusion, I would like to tell you an anecdote about Barbarians and Europe.

I had a painter friend who was a firm believer. One very hot afternoon, he had to go into a church – not just to pray, but also to take advantage of the cool atmosphere. Inside, there was nobody – except for the priest, bare-chested, sitting at a table before the altar with a bottle of wine. My friend, wine lover though he is, was somewhat put off. *“Father, I don’t understand. I go into the church with the devout intention to pray and what do I find: the priest in a state of undress, drinking wine in front of the altar!”*

This was the European reaction: my friend wanted respect for the institution, observance of the rules.

And the priest went: *“My son, this is God’s house. I feel at home here – and I intend to act accordingly and if you don’t like it, get out!”*

That was the barbarian response: the priest was not cowed by solemnities or institutional rigor.

This trait has something entirely sublime about it, it brings some freshness in the relationship to God and to the institution – but it also carries the seeds of chaos.