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Paris 1933: A 'Société des Esprits' Chaired by Paul Valéry

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Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

European studies

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Heerikhuizen, A. (2014). Paris 1933: A 'Société des Esprits' Chaired by Paul Valéry. *European studies*, 32, 139-154.

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/rodopi/es/2014/00000032/00000001/art00009>

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PARIS 1933
A 'SOCIÉTÉ DES ESPRITS' CHAIRED BY PAUL VALÉRY

Annemarie van Heerikhuizen

Abstract

In October 1933, not long after the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany, an interesting group of European intellectuals gathered in the French capital to discuss 'the future of the European mind'. Writers and academics from all over Europe took part in the discussions that were organized by the League of Nations and chaired by the French poet and essayist Paul Valéry. Is it possible to see the discussions as successful examples of intellectual exchange, of sharing ideas concerning the problems of Europe? In this chapter special attention will be given to the contributions of Johan Huizinga, Hermann von Keyserling, Julien Benda, Pál Teleki, Jean Cantacuzène and Jules Romains. Did they succeed in becoming – as Valéry hoped – 'a power of transformation' that could rescue the world?

Introduction

Paris 1933. Some months after the coming to power of the Nazis a company of distinguished European intellectuals gathered in the French capital for a three-day conference (16-18 October) on the future of the European mind (*L'avenir de l'esprit européen*). These intellectuals, mostly writers and academics, came from all over Europe: many were from France, others from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Romania, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland.¹

¹ The Paris conference was attended by, from France: Paul Valéry (chairman), Julien Benda, Léon Brunschvicg, Georges Duhamel, Henri Focillon, R.P. de la Brière, E. de Las-Cases, Anatole de Monzie, Denis Parodi, Gaston Rageot, Jules Rais and Jules Romains. From Portugal: Julio Dantas. From Spain: Salvador de Madariaga.

The conference was organised by the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IICI), a League of Nations organisation, which was located in the Palais-Royal, where the conference also took place. The reason for this conference and the sense of urgency of the event, are clearly expressed in the inauguration speeches of Emile Borel (organisation committee), Paul Valéry (chairman) and Anatole de Monzie (Minister of National Education). In the proceedings of the conference we read:

Dans leurs discours d'inauguration, M.M. Emile Borel, Paul Valéry et Anatole de Monzie ont rappelé l'objet de l'Entretien. M. Borel (...) a montré que dans les circonstances actuelles, la meilleure méthode était de demander à quelques hommes d'élite de confronter leurs vues sur l'avenir de l'esprit européen. M. Valéry (...) a souligné les difficultés de l'entreprise en insistant sur 'ce qu'on pourrait appeler la sensibilité ou l'irritabilité de certaines questions'. M. De Monzie enfin (...) a mis en évidence la nécessité 'de rétablir le contact entre les forces purement spirituelles et les forces naturelles [non spirituelles] qui, de temps en temps, réclament leur place et leur rôle dans la vie des sociétés' (IICI 1934, 6).

The aim of this article is to discover whether the congress was successful, if its objectives were achieved and if the European elite was indeed able to formulate some clear answers regarding the actual threats to Europe. But it also aims to find out – as anticipated in Valéry's words – if there were controversial points in the discussion, making the conference a more difficult undertaking. In the words of this volume: can the conference be seen as a successful example of 'intellectual exchange', of sharing ideas and re-thinking the problems of Europe?

Surprisingly enough, until now, little research has been done on these Paris debates. Michael Renoliet summarized several League of Nations conferences in his study on intellectual cooperation after the First World War but provided no extensive analysis on the Paris conference (Renoliet 1999). In a recently published article Michel Jarrety discusses some of the leading ideas, without going into the details of the Paris debates (Jarrety 2011). The intention of this article is to describe, as precisely as possible, the opinions that were put forward in Paris at that time, as well as in the

From Italy: Emilio Bodrero, Francesco Coppola and Federigo Enriquès. From Great Britain: Aldous Huxley. From Germany: Count Hermann von Keyserling. From Denmark: Viggo Broendal. From the Netherlands: Johan Huizinga and Josef Limburg. From Belgium: Jules Destrée. From Hungary: Count Pál Teleki. From Romania: Jean Cantacuzène. From Switzerland: William Martin.

conferences that preceded Paris, in Frankfurt and Madrid, to clarify which ideas were shared by the intellectuals, and also which caused dissention among them.

From Geneva to Paris

To understand the Paris conference, the origins of the organisation that made Paris possible must first be considered, that is, the League of Nations, although in reality it was just one country that was responsible for the whole event; its organisation, venue and financing, as well as the publication of its proceedings: France, under the leadership of Édouard Herriot's 'Cartel des Gauches'.

Remarkably, the League of Nations, when this international organisation was formed in 1919, gave no attention at all to intellectual activities. The promotion of international peace and security was a political, economic, and legal affair, not an intellectual one, is to be deduced from the Covenant. Nevertheless, according to many of the leading internationalists of the day, the League could never succeed in its aims without the inclusion of intellectual cooperation. Therefore, in 1921, after a League of Nations resolution on the subject had been passed, an International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (CICI) was founded. The new organisation was backed by famous men and women from diverse countries and academic disciplines in Europe who became its first members (among them Henri Bergson, Marie Curie-Sklodowska, Jules Destrée and Gilbert Murray). The close connection of these individual members to the principles underlying the League of Nations is clear from the fact that they participated not as representatives of their nations, but as politically independent men and women.

Due in a large part to the French politics of that period, the CICI became more than just a respectable club for academics and writers who were in support of the ideals of the League of Nations and met occasionally in Geneva. In 1926 the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IICI) was founded in Paris, to prepare the meetings of the CICI, and to implement its decisions. This actually became the executive organ of the commission or, as the French Minister of Public Education called it in a letter to Henri Bergson, the president of the commission: the 'instrument of action' of the commission (Pham-Thi-Tu 1962, 87).

The 1933 Paris meeting might never have happened without the establishment of this new institute that had been financed for the most

part by the French government. The French interest in intellectual cooperation and their willingness to finance it each year with a substantial amount of money can be explained in several ways. As a consequence of the Ruhr occupation and the amelioration of international relations after the Locarno Treaty, the French wanted to raise their international prestige and to show the world their peace-loving intentions. Besides, an old tradition existed in France, dating back to the times of Louis XIV, that motivated the French government to finance intellectual cooperation. For centuries culture had been an integral part of French politics (Riemens 2005, 237).

The IICI, which officially operated in complete independence of the French government, not only functioned as the executive organ of the commission in Geneva, but also initiated activities of its own: it published brochures and books, founded documentary centres, coordinated academic activities and developed several educational programmes. In 1932, with the help of the Permanent Commission of Letters and Arts of the League of Nations, the IICI began to organise intellectual conferences ('entretiens'). Jules Destrée, a Walloon lawyer, cultural critic and politician presided over the first 'entretiens' in Frankfurt am Main (12-14 May 1932); Marie Curie chaired the second one in Madrid. However, the most important man behind the scenes was the French poet Paul Valéry, a passionate advocate of, as he called it, a 'société des esprits'. He was the spiritual father of a frequently-quoted and influential formula of the time that said 'la Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits' (Jarrety 2011, 98).

Frankfurt: Goethe

The conference at Frankfurt in 1932 can be considered as a sort of test case: to what extent could these intellectuals be seen as a truly *united* community, a 'Society of Minds'?² The conference was organised on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of Goethe's death and a better occasion could hardly be imagined. Goethe was seen by all the partici-

² The Frankfurt conference was attended by, from France: Henri Focillon, Julien Luchaire and Paul Valéry. From Spain: Salvador de Madariaga. From Italy: Ugo Ojetti and Roberto Paribeni. From Great Britain: Gilbert Murray. From Germany: Thomas Mann and Wilhelm Waetzoldt, From Belgium: Jules Destrée (chairman). From Norway: Nini Roll-Anker. From Sweden: Ragnar Oestberg. From Romania: Georges Opresco and Hélène Vacaresco. From Austria: Josef Strzygowski. From Czechoslovakia: Karel Čapek. From Switzerland: Gonzague de Reynold From Bolivia: Adolfo Costa du Rels.

pants at the conference as the perfect example of the intellectual they had in mind: a man connected to his own country but at the same time a universalist. Or, as Destrée said in his opening speech, comparing him to Dante and Shakespeare:

Je n'ai pas à vous dire que Goethe est un de ces rares élus de la littérature et de l'art qui, comme Dante ou Shakespeare, tout en restant fortement de leur pays, sont, en même temps, des figures universelles. La célébration du Centenaire de Goethe était, pour nous, une occasion unique d'affirmer l'esprit qui nous anime (IICI 1932, 9).

But there was more, as becomes apparent in the debates which follow, that made Goethe such an interesting figure. Goethe, who had lived in the time of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, had been confronted with more or less the same kind of problems now facing the intellectuals: the reconstruction of a new world and the formulation of new morals to replace the old, ineffectual ones. The power of Goethe as an exemplary figure was that he had not succumbed to the revolution and turmoil around him but had survived, as an intellectual.

No one expressed this feeling of intellectual kinship more beautifully than the Swiss writer and historian Gonzague de Reynold. To him Goethe was a man who, without secluding himself in an ivory tower, had succeeded in using all his intellectual capabilities to come to an understanding of his own time. And so, according to De Reynold, he fulfilled the definition of a hero: a man who is always focussed on his own intellectual ideas, in any situation. In De Reynold's words: 'un homme immuablement concentré', with special gifts:

posséder la sensibilité, la réceptivité nécessaire pour que votre temps se reflète en vous et que vous lui renvoyiez ce reflet en lumière. C'est ce que Goethe a su faire. Il a su réagir, sortir du courant, se tenir debout sur le bord, deviner, pressentir où ce courant allait (IICI 1932, 70).

Thomas Mann also participated in these discussions. He was a great admirer of Goethe and even strongly identified with the famous German writer (Kurzke 2002). In Frankfurt Mann underlined Goethe's duality, that is, his special German-European attitude: 'vis-à-vis de l'Allemagne, il [Goethe] s'est montré européen; vis-à-vis de l'Europe, il s'est montré allemande' (IICI 1932, 91-92). Mann hoped that through Goethe the German people, who were currently suffering so greatly, could regain their confidence. Our relations with the world are complicated, Mann

stated. But Germany, as *l' Alemanité*, could make itself loved again in the world (IICI 1932, 197).

In his speech Paul Valéry characterised Goethe foremost as an 'Homme d'Univers', a man not limited nor affected by a special time, race or nationality. Goethe, with his superior spiritual powers, could have lived in any time or country. He was comparable only to other sovereign men such as Napoleon and Caesar (IICI 1932, 93-95).

Nevertheless, during the conference other opinions were also voiced. The Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski sketched Goethe not as a universal thinker, but as a man from the North, with clear Indo-Aryan roots. He illustrated this by analysing some largely-unknown landscapes painted by Goethe, which according to Strzygowski showed definite northern characteristics. Strzygowski was of the opinion that the Germans should honour Goethe, this northern hero, with a huge monument, as a manifestation of the German spirit: 'Nous devrions donc élever un grand monument qui serait dédié à Goethe et, à travers lui, à tout l'art contemporain de Goethe, qui serait une véritable manifestation de l'esprit allemande' (IICI 1932, 115).

Madrid: 'L'avenir de la culture'

Pour une Société des Esprits was the optimistic title of a booklet that was published directly after the Frankfurt conference and in which Valéry underlined the importance and necessity of the entretiens. A year later, in May 1933, the discussions continued in Madrid on the theme 'The Future of the Culture' (*L'avenir de la culture*) and Madam Curie-Sklodowska (Marie Curie) was chairing. A varied company of intellectuals took part in the discussions, many from the host country, Spain, and also several intellectuals who had been present in Frankfurt, including Josef Strzygowski. They all were senior intellectuals, prominent men in the academic world, but not engaged in politics³

³ The Madrid conference was attended by, from France: Paul Langevin, Jules Romains and Paul Valéry. From Portugal: Julio Dantas. From Spain: Agustin Calvet, Salvador de Madariaga, G. Maranon, Manuel Garcia Morente and Miguel de Unamuno. From Italy: F. Orestano and F. Severi. From Great Britain: J.B.S. Haldane. From Germany: Otto Lehmann and H. Pinder. From Denmark: Viggo Broendal. From Romania: Georges Opresco and Hélène Vacaresco. From Austria: Josef Strzygowski. From Poland: Karol Szymanowski. From Mexico: G. Estrada. From the United States: Edwin M. Gay. The president, Madam Curie-Sklodowska, was born in Poland in 1867, but she lived and worked in France. She died one year after the conference, in 1934.

The opening speech by the Spanish philosopher Manuel Garcia Morente, explicitly described the dangers threatening European culture. Its future was, he said, 'une question de vie ou de mort' (IICI 1933, 11). Morente, a specialist and translator of Spengler's work (*Untergang des Abendlandes*) into Spanish, was of the opinion that the West was not, as Spengler predicted, going to die, but nevertheless was suffering a deep crisis. The symptoms of this crisis were a loss of universal knowledge, and a decline of civilisation among the masses (IICI 1933, 12-18). In his speech Morente also made clear that, concerning the question of nationalism and universalism, he was a supporter of the idea that both were relevant and, as a Spanish citizen, he had Don Quichotte as reference. His comment about Cervante's book was: 'Un ouvrage comme *Don Quichotte de la Manche* est très espagnol, et précisément à cause de cette qualité, il est très humain et universel' (IICI 1933, 24).

Not all intellectuals shared Morente's ideas. The French writer Jules Romains was much more hopeful concerning Europe's future. According to him the intelligentsia could, by spreading their ideas and intellectual work, create a stronger and safer culture. Of great importance, in his view, was the work of the League of Nations, which therefore had to become a less bureaucratic institute. In his opinion, what the world needed, was imagination. Romains' words illustrate the enormous gap there was between the intellectuals discussing the problems of the world within their comfortable conference rooms, and the masses outside:

Je reproche à la Société des Nations d'être une oeuvre trop purement administrative, rationnelle et tranquille, d'être trop exclusivement une oeuvre de sagesse bureaucratique. Je voudrais que l'on fit pour elle des manifestations populaires et passionnantes qui remuent les foules, que l'on fit pour elle des cortèges avec des costumes et de la musique, je voudrais que l'on remplit pour elle le ciel d'éclats de bombes et de feux d'artifice (IICI 1933, 41).

Other intellectuals, among them the Romanian cultural critic George Oprescu, underlined the equivalence and mutual dependence of the intellectuals and the masses (IICI 1933, 116-117). Some even warned the intellectuals against becoming an esoteric club (IICI 1933, 162).

The only woman participating in the Madrid discussions, the Romanian-French poet Hélène Vacaresco, was of the opinion that, to raise culture, more attention should be given to the complete human being, not only by promoting intellectual capabilities, but also those of the emotions: 'La vraie culture est intérieure et touche à l'âme' (IICI 1933, 134). Some participants, like the Spanish writer Salvador de

Madariaga, argued that culture was not something of the sentiments but foremost rational and should be based on science (IICI 1933, 146). He supported the idea, put forward by the British biologist J.B.S. Haldane, of a 'culture syndicale', an association of universities and scientists to promote Western culture (IICI 1933, 237-239).

Several speakers in Madrid, including the Italians F. Orestano and F. Severi, defended the principle of the national state and did not agree with universal ideals. Strzygowski again expressed his special love for the Indo-Aryan culture and rejected the idea of *one* universal culture (IICI 1933, 250-251). At the end of the conference, 'la Présidente' Madam Curie summarized all the highly individual points of view but made no secret of her own, personal ideas:

Nous pouvons reconnaître que le rêve d'avenir exige la synthèse des cultures nationales, et la subordination des divergences qui sont principalement de nature politique, à un but universel qui est celui de la culture de la civilisation (IICI 1933, 217).

However, it was not Curie but Valéry who concluded the conference with some final words. Valéry compared the conference with an ensemble of brave but confused Don Quichottes and said: 'J'oserai vous dire (...) que je vous présente un ensemble de Don Quichottes, de Don Quichottes de l'esprit qui se battent contre leurs moulins à vent' (IICI 1933, 281). Valéry also referred to his own words, that a society of nations supposed a society of minds and that what the world needed most was a 'politique de l'esprit' (IICI 1933, 284-285). An intellectual elite of writers and academics *outside* the 'official politics', had to pave the way to Europe's future.

Paris: L'avenir de l'Europe'

In Paris many of the themes discussed in Frankfurt and Madrid would re-emerge. Under the leadership of Paul Valéry, the debates would again reveal a great diversity in opinions. There were pessimists who believed that Europe was in a deep crisis and its future seriously threatened but also optimists who were of the opinion that there was no crisis at all. And there was still another category: outspoken principle men, among them the French writer Julien Benda. According to Benda European intellectuals should fight for 'absolute values' and not just wait and see what the future would bring. This appeal confronted the conference with right wing values too, which in Paris were principally defended by the

Italian journalist Francesco Coppola. Finally, some intellectuals had found inspiration by simply observing changes in their immediate environment, such as a revival of academic life.

As previously mentioned, Paul Valéry, who succeeded Curie as chairman in Paris, strongly believed in the power of a ‘société des esprits’. However, in *La crise de l’esprit* (1919) he had still sketched a Europe in which the military crisis was over, but the intellectual crisis wasn’t. The facts were clear and pitiless. He wrote that many young intellectuals had not survived the war; the dream of a European culture was over, the intellectuals were powerless. (Valéry 1989, 26). Some years later he became slightly more hopeful and, in *La politique de l’esprit*, published just a year before the Paris conference, he argued that the mind was able to cope with the post war chaos and could rescue Europe’s future. By the word ‘mind’ Valéry did not mean a metaphysical entity but a ‘power of transformation’ (Valéry 1989, 91, 94). All this formed the background to Valéry’s opening speech in Paris in which he stated:

Nous sommes en présence d’un état de choses qui a forcé même ceux qui n’avaient pas consacré leur temps à réfléchir sur les destins de l’esprit (...) à se demander comment l’avenir se présente pour ce capital considérable qui avait été assemblé, et qui n’est pas seulement constitué par des connaissances (...) mais surtout par quelque chose que nous appelons “esprit”, c’est-à-dire une certaine manière de transformer ce qui se présente à nous (IICI 1934, 9).

From Valéry’s Paris speech it becomes clear that, although ‘esprit’ had the power to transform things, it was nevertheless still weak and under attack. Not long ago, he said, we believed that we could conquer the world, that our common values were safe. But today, these common values are in great danger. ‘Nous voici donc’, Valéry said

en présence de ce problème, qui est *notre* problème, Messieurs, – celui que nous sommes réunis pour examiner: Que pouvons-nous prévoir, que devons-nous penser de la variation prochaine, probable de l’esprit européen? (IICI 1934, 12)

Pessimism and optimism seemed to go hand in hand with Valéry. He considered intellectuals as having the power to change things, to transform the world around them. But even they were sometimes infected by nationalism. Two different personalities existed within them:

l’un qui précisément est cet Européen, l’un qui a une culture généralisée à l’Europe, qui a ce sentiment de l’universalité, de tout ce qu’il y a de plus beau (...). Mais, à côté de ce personnage, il y en a un autre qui parle sa langue, qui

est enfermé dans ses traditions nationales. (...) Tantôt nous nous trouvons plus universaux, plus européens que nous ne sommes nationaux, et tantôt, à la moindre circonstance, qui affecte notre sensibilité, beaucoup plus nationaux qu'européens (IICI 1934, 13-14).

Obviously, Europe still was in great danger. Nevertheless, at the end of his speech Valéry again referred to a possible 'variation prochaine'; intellectuals just had to study and think more deeply about Europe's future. This was part of the politics of the mind.

Intellectual Europe

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, one of the first speakers at the conference, shared Valéry's deep concerns, but his argumentation was slightly different. Europe, he said, was returning to 'barbarie'. All sorts of national organisations were hostile to common European values. Huizinga, in his speech, which was clearly founded on his historical publications from the years preceding the conference – *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (1919); *Erasmus* (1924) – described the way in which, from the time of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, an international community of intellectuals had arisen, a Republic of Lettered Men. In contrast to Valéry, Huizinga was of the opinion that the ideas of this republic had not completely disappeared after the Great War. According to him the intellectuals of the twentieth century, although now in the defence, could even be seen as the direct heirs of that republic. He asked them to be proud of this heritage: 'Comme Européens de l'esprit, nous sommes surtout les héritiers directs du dix-huitième siècle et de l'humanisme. Soyons-en fiers' (IICI 1934, 62).

However, nationalism also played a part in Europe's history. Huizinga argued that this had once been harmless, peaceful and primarily cultural. Therefore he saw nationalism as not necessarily a threat to intellectual Europe. In his words: 'Il faudra mettre les éléments plus nobles d'un nationalisme fondé dans la vraie culture au service d'un européenisme apte à recueillir et à concilier les différences de civilisation nationales' (IICI 1934, 63).

The British writer Aldous Huxley expressed a far greater concern about the modern way of life but he also believed that Europe would eventually survive. As he had illustrated in his science fiction novel *Brave New World*, published in 1932, he saw modern life becoming characterised by consumerism, mass production and the advance of technological science. Human beings were losing control over their own lives. All this

formed a threat to Europe too, he believed, as he clearly expressed in his Paris speech, which was not without a spark of humour. Technological inventions had made the production possible, at a very low cost, of thousands of poor quality books. Now vulgarity posed the greatest problem for modern Europe, the spread of bad literature (detectives) and bad music (jazz). The only way to save Europe was through the fine arts: ‘si l’art supérieur reste pur, tout n’est pas perdu’ (ICI 1934, 142).

Non-Intellectual values

During the conference it also became obvious that some intellectuals were not at all dissatisfied with ‘modern’ Europe. One of them was the German philosopher and writer Count Hermann von Keyserling. Keyserling was the author of *Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* (1919) and *Das Spektrum Europas* (1928), bestsellers in interbellum Europe. Keyserling was of the opinion, based on his travels through Europe and other regions of the world, that a new era was approaching, a time characterised by a universal ‘esprit planétaire’:

De nos jours, il est impossible de traiter de la question européenne sans prendre comme point de départ la totalité des humains; le contact immédiat entre tous les points du globe, créé par les moyens de communication modernes, a fait de tout le monde des voisins et l’esprit de l’époque est, par conséquent, un esprit planétaire (ICI 1934, 15).

This optimistic viewpoint would not have come as a surprise to his audience in Paris. His books also contained the suggestion that a universal world would soon come into being. In fact, so Keyserling reasoned, Europeanism did already exist as the result of a lively intellectual exchange between the elites of the European countries. Keyserling argued that this European elite should not turn their backs on society but instead, simply join it. In that age of mass culture, dominated by non-intellectual forces, intellectuals were needed more than ever before. It was essential to realise two things: firstly, that ‘des forces telluriques’ – the natural, non-intellectual forces – were ‘des choses bonnes en soi’ and life had always been a mixture of natural and spiritual elements. Secondly: the masses had become docile and passive but nevertheless, in order to provide them with a future, they needed spiritual leadership. What a great opportunity for the intellectuals! They could raise the world:

Car si les mondes nouveaux naissent, comme naissent les enfants, des bas-fonds à travers des processus élémentaires souvent horribles et contraires à

toute norme de l'Esprit, ce sont toujours les impulsions spirituelles qui jouent le rôle du père et donnent leur forme définitive et son sens définitif au monde nouveau-né (IICI 1934, 34).

Absolute values

The French writer Julien Benda was one of the most outspoken opponents of this form of reasoning. First he attacked Huizinga, who had pleaded for humanism, as well as for nationalism, in his speech. This was completely wrong, according to Benda. The message to the European people had to be:

Nous ne voulons pas détruire vos différences nationales; mais nous vous invitons à vous sentir dans une région de vous-même, qui nous appellerons humanisme, où vous pourrez vous reconnaître semblables, et qui est supérieure à celle dans laquelle vous vous sentez différents (IICI 1934, 66).

But Benda also disagreed principally with Keyserling. He queried the necessity of joining society, to come to the help of the masses in that way. According to Benda this would only be possible when intellectuals had the firm intention to fight what was wrong. In his words: 'J'accorde que nous devons marcher avec notre temps (...) pour ne pas perdre son audience, mais avec la ferme intention par devers nous de le combattre dans ce qu'il a de mauvais...' (IICI 1934, 67).

Benda, who had already, in his *La Trahison des clercs* (1927), argued against intellectuals becoming apologists for nationalism and racism, instead of for humanism and shared intellectual values, was to clash with the Italian journalist and fascist Francesco Coppola, too. Coppola argued, contrary to Benda, that certain intellectual ideas, such as the ideas of the Enlightenment, simply had no meaning anymore in modern Europe. He argued that circumstances had changed, that these ideas were outdated (IICI 1934, 189, 206-210). Benda's principal reaction was: not the circumstances determine the ideas, but ideas determine the circumstances. And so the ideas of the Enlightenment should never be surrendered.

Some hopeful observations

Many contributions were inspired by the speaker's own country or academic discipline. For example, Count Pál Teleki, a professor of geography in Budapest, and an important former politician in Hungary (he had been Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs), presented his own

unique view on Europe's future. His speech was definitely influenced by his academic background and Hungary's multinational environment. You know the map of Europe, he said, so you know that Europe, thanks to its geology, is a fragmented and diverse continent with highly interesting regional cultures. Hard facts underpinned his argument ('cette diversité de l'Europe est un fait') and also a deep love for Europe's cultural wealth and refinement. But the most important phenomenon on Europe's map was, according to Teleki, the so-called 'région de transit'. These transnational border regions were the key to making Europe more peaceful and united. 'Plus on accentue les régions de transit qui en Europe sont la majorité, plus on diminue l'importance des frontières' (IICI 1934, 96-97). The way in which to succeed in making transnational border regions more important in Europe was, in his opinion, primarily the task of the intellectuals themselves. They should promote regional cultural life, through literature and education, for the future of Europe.

The Romanian physician and bacteriologist Jean Cantacuzène distinguished himself by his lucid, pragmatic reasoning. Cantacuzène's approach was that of an empiric scientist: therefore, as a more or less neutral observer, he reported exactly what he had observed directly around him. Just look around and what do we see? Is there any pessimism in the European academic world at all? No, there was not, so he believed. European academics would never give up their methods and notions (liberty of ideas), and their ultimate aim, finding 'the truth'. Cantacuzène, as a lecturer, was also optimistic because his own students seemed to be less lamentable than just after the Great War. He thought that intellectuals should really not be too pessimistic:

Il faut éviter un pessimisme excessif (...) Nous avons eu, après la guerre, des générations d'étudiants lamentables, emprisonnées dans un matérialisme effrayant (...). Vous ne pouvez imaginer le changement qui s'est accompli depuis peu; je le suis avec bonheur d'année en année et je vois cette transformation s'opérer (IICI 1934, 123-124).

And Cantacuzène observed something else that impressed him and gave him hope for the future: a real 'invasion' of academic books:

Une autre observation me frappe. Je crois qu'à aucune époque le monde du livre n'a connu une telle invasion d'ouvrages de généralisation scientifique, touchant (...) les problèmes d'astronomie, les problèmes de physique générale, de haute biologie. Il faut bien que cela corresponde à un besoin nouveau dans les esprits (IICI 1934, 124).

The fact that very nearby, in Germany, thousands of books were being burned and writers were having to flee into exile (Thomas Mann), was simply ignored by Cantacuzène.

The end of the Paris conference: no politics

One of the results of the conference was that a research committee was set up to continue the discussions, a 'Société d'Etudes Européennes'. With a unanimous vote the conference accepted the statutes in which Article One stipulated:

La Société d'Etudes Européennes a pour objet l'étude des questions d'ordre intellectuel qui intéressent l'avenir de la civilisation européenne. Elle s'efforcera notamment, par les relations personnelles entre ses membres, d'aider l'Europe à prendre conscience de l'unité de sa culture (IICI 1934, 242).

Notably, during the final debates, the French writer Jules Romains showed himself to be extremely critical about the conference in general. He expressed regret that politics had not been part of the discussions and wanted to continue them only when attendance was given to current political problems. Otherwise, he said, 'esprit' would lose authority and never be capable of reaching the attention of the masses (IICI 1934, 289-293). Valéry nevertheless concluded the conference without giving up the non-political character of the conference and declared: 'Je considère la politique, l'action politique, les formes politiques comme des valeurs inférieures et des activités inférieures de l'esprit' (IICI 1934, 303).

Paris would be followed by new 'entretiens' in Venice (1934), Nice (1935) and Budapest (1936). Therefore, despite the fact that the Paris conference had not been characterised by a high degree of intellectual exchange, it seemed that something like a 'Republica Litteraria' had come into existence once more; an apparently unified intellectual world, far away from politics.

Conclusion

A review of the history of the 'entretiens' could lead to agreeing with some commentators, that the discussions had not been very successful, due to the lack of consensus among the participants. Besides the principle of 'no politics' – Hitler was not mentioned once! –, combined with the fact that the intellectuals participated in the discussions, not as representatives of their own nations but – loyal to the idea of universalism –

as independent individuals, resulted in nothing less than political impotence (Renoliet 1999). Further, from the start, intellectual cooperation was hampered by a deficient legitimacy: after all, cooperation did not form part of the Covenant of the League of Nations. In other words, it had no place in the 'core' activities of Geneva. Finally, the young generation who sympathized with new left wing political experiments, such as Soviet communism, was totally missing. Actually the conference presented the opinions of a senior intellectual elite.

Nevertheless, it is important to realise that people living in the thirties, those actually confronted with the dangers of nationalism and racism, appreciated the discussions for the very reason that they represented some element of peaceful international collaboration still alive in Europe at that time. The Dutch commentator Menno ter Braak wrote in one of his essays (27 May 1934) that although European intellectuals had formed an international community for centuries, at that moment, when nationalism had become such an imminent threat to European culture, every European manifestation was welcome. He also found it regrettable, just like Romans, that politics had not been included in the discussions, but he considers that now 'we could use some intellectuality' (Ter Braak 1980, 196).

Finally, the historian Michael Riemens is of the opinion that the participating intellectuals created a political culture that has remained with us till the present day (Riemens 2005). The characteristics of this culture are a 'passion for peace' and democratic values, a strong commitment to the ideals of the League of Nations (and later to the ideals of the United Nations). The intellectuals were, so Riemens argues, the 'true believers' of an idealistic and peaceful culture. In fact they did pioneering work. Seen from this perspective, Paul Valéry's 'société des esprits', did indeed transform the world. On the base of this chapter we can conclude that the 'entretiens' did not result in a profound exchange of European ideas, but were definitely part of that new culture that cherished the League of Nations ideals of universal peace and reconciliation.

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