

## LECTURE HERMAN VAN ROMPUY

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The title of my lecture is: is the EU still a product of humanism? I would like to add: does the EU still produce humanism? I will try to answer the two questions.

The EU actually means a return or even the beginning of humanism in politics on our continent. Christianity and the Enlightenment have never succeeded in putting into practice their own humane principles for a long time and on a large scale. They have been a source of inspiration for many in politics and beyond, but unfortunately too much just a source of inspiration. The EU broke with the history of wars. After the Second World War, the welfare states were also established in Western Europe, which in turn contributed to the humanisation of society. This double movement marked a turning point in European history. We are still insufficiently aware of this or, worse still, part of the population has forgotten about it and some support even pre-war ideas.

After the war, the national government played the countervailing power against the market. Today there is a need to counterbalance global markets on the European and even on the global level. The national social corrections are no longer sufficient.

A humane policy places the person at the centre and not the nation or the group. This form of collectivisation pulverises the person. We are then one million divided by one million. The person is also more than an isolated individual who lives without ties and connections with his fellow human beings, without a form of belonging to his 'frères humains', without solidarity. The social market economy and the European 'Community' broke with this lack of humanism. It took two world wars to reach that decision.

This model of peace, democracy and prosperity for all worked as a magnet for fascist and communist countries. The Union's 'soft power' was undoubtedly at the root of the second largest political event in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century: the end of inhumane communism. Today, too, one can say that the European way of life is the dream of 80% of humanity, as I recently read. Of course we are not ideal, but for many we are an ideal. But the Union today is often not an ideal for Europeans themselves. However, if I look only at the Union and make a brief abstraction of the 28 internal policies, I can see that two thirds of the 500 million Europeans believe that membership of the Union is a good thing for their own country and that 75% want to remain in the euro area, which was so disputed until recently. Brexit as an example of non-Europe and its cost have made many citizens think. The uncertainty of an exit would only increase the current uncertainty and fear. I now read that many Europeans fear that the Union may fall apart. But fear is not the same as hope.

Our societies are not only marked by the welfare state and by European unification. The technological, biological and sexual revolutions, secularisation and individualisation, globalisation, uncontrolled migration, the explosion of geographical and communication connectivity have created a different kind of man and society. They have brought more happiness to many who have had opportunities in life but also much insecurity because the changes have sometimes tested the capacity of people to absorb and digest these changes, to integrate them into their lives. Moreover, some people are better equipped than others to cope with all kinds of changes. Not everyone has the same opportunities. New inequalities were born. Sometimes it seems as if society has been lifted from its handles. Many are looking for a new stability in the midst of change, a new balance.

Existing political, social and ideological organisations are seeking their way into the 'drunken ship' that society sometimes seems to be. They are usually themselves rudderless. In a country like France, for

example, it is possible that the political elite was in distress as a result of a movement that escaped any control, such as that of trade unions. For example, it is possible that the current largest party in Italy is not even a party but a website. The USA is under the spell of a twittering president who forces his political family to listen to him and not the other way around. Of course, social media play a role in this. They erode civil society unwillingly or unwillingly. The direct face to face dialogue and therefore the confrontation of ideas is replaced by targeted messages. Emotions play a major role in this. Emotions are synonymous with short-term 'thinking'.

But these newcomers to politics may only be there for a short time. Today's heroes can be condemned tomorrow. That volatility is everywhere. The citizen 'zaps', sometimes desperate, sometimes unreasonable. Look at Brexit.

The same person we put so centrally in the new Europe after the war, has now often the impression that he is just a 'number', the result of a division of one million divided by one million, a surprising evolution. Many have the impression that they are not being listened to and that the political agenda of politics is not that of the people. For a politician it is not so difficult to listen but it is difficult to make decisions because society has never been so divided, fragmented and heterogeneous. A decision is a choice. One often disappoints as many people as one satisfies. The disillusioned speak of a 'democratic deficit'. It happens at all levels of government. Many people feel that they are at the mercy of forces that transcend the country - markets, multinationals or international institutions - or at least that they have no control over, despite the illusion given to them at every election that the national and European voters have the last word.

Many think that our society is not so humane. And that is more about the national than the European dimension. In fact, confidence in the EU is still greater than in national governments.

I am concerned about the value attached to political democracy, or rather the lack of it. In fact, democracy is judged above all by its added value: to what extent does it solve problems? In my view, the participation of people in policy is a value in itself. Fortunately, authoritarian regimes such as those in Turkey and Russia are now also being judged on their added value. Both are now in economically turbulent waters through their own fault. The populists in Italy and in the UK pay an economic price for their delusions.

A policy where 'man is the measure of all things' is a gigantic task. Brexit, the American situation, the movement of the yellow vests, show a gap between cities and the countryside, between the highly skilled and the low-skilled, between young and old. And there are other gaps.

A key word for today's national and European politics is 'protection'. 'Une Europe qui protège', as Mitterrand once said. It is an old concept in politics. Think of 'social protection'.

The social dimension is once again being highlighted by the high level of unemployment in a number of countries, by the unstable employment situation and job statutes of many, by the growing new inequalities affecting the middle classes on top of the old inequalities that have never really been eliminated. People also compare their own situation more closely with that of others. The exhibitionism of 'nouveaux riches' on both sides of the ocean, is shocking. Don't forget that in the USA, the median worker's real wage has barely increased in forty years, while productivity has almost doubled. Since 1980, the incomes of the 50% of the poorest people have increased by 37% in Europe, while they have stagnated in the United States. So far, European societies have not gone down this blind alley, but we have had to be vigilant. The slogan 'jobs, jobs, jobs' or 'growth, growth, growth' is insufficient to alleviate the social malaise, also in Europe.

Growing inequalities in the EU have become a source of social dissatisfaction and unrest. But we must not fall into generalisations. These inequalities often are the result of increasing global competition and digitisation although not sufficiently corrected by policies. However, there is increasing convergence between continents, particularly between Asia and others. Another nuance is that there is also lasting convergence between Western Europe and Central Europe due to the EU's cohesion policies. Since 1995, regional inequality across EU countries has been reduced significantly (25%) though the 2008 crisis temporarily undid some progress. Between North and South in the Union, there is now divergence after the financial crisis. It should be added that some of the southern countries were fast growing prior to 2008 on the basis of borrowed money, which was reflected in huge current account deficits of the balance of payments. This convergence was to some extent artificial.

The problem arises mainly within Member States themselves, but not in all of them to the same extent. Minority groups are lagging behind even in countries with high employment. Politically, the fact that low middle-income households are lagging behind is a sensitive issue because it affects a large number of people. They have been affected by the digitisation of many of their activities. This will increase in the coming decades. Moreover, it is not certain that digitisation on a macro level will make a net contribution to employment.

Protection is also required by many against uncontrolled irregular migration. Every social saving is compared with the government's spending on asylum seekers, so that areas without the presence of migrants are also exposed to xenophobia. Terrorism and the influx of refugees from 2015-2016 have, of course, reinforced these feelings. Fears are growing that current trends are just a start. Fear is characterised by the fact that it represents things out of proportion and almost as hopeless.

This fear is a mixture of a social and an identity problem. Will we still be what we are today? The problem is special because even without migration there is an identity problem. Where is the modern man in this world full of changes? What are his references, now that he or she has to find them out for himself or herself? What is the meaning of life, of everything we do? 'Mother, why do we live' is a cry, especially in this 'Low Country' so marked by diseases of civilisation, such as suicide. By the way, The US has experienced two consecutive years of declining life expectancy, in 2016 and 2017 – the longest consecutive decline since World War I and the subsequent flu epidemic. Yet the current decline is caused by despair, not by illness. Suicide rates and opioid overdoses are soaring.

Our identity is so to speak threatened by islamists, but what is our own identity in this global and digital world? Of course it is true that we have common values such as political democracy, human rights, non-discrimination, the separation between religious and philosophical organisations and the State, our language and culture, but all that is about public values. However, a society needs more. It also needs affective bonds, social and family capital, security and solidarity, volunteers and innovators, compassion and respect in everyday life. When that decreases or sometimes even disappears, then society is in the process of losing its soul. This recovery goes beyond beyond politics. But it is mainly demanded of politics. Even if this cannot be met, there must be a language, a behaviour and a policy that indicates how important these values are in living societies.

The classical political struggle makes us forget this human dimension. It is easier to create fear and panic or to pretend to be an almost technocratic problem-solver. In short, the problem of identity must be described not only in relation to other groups or tribes, but also in a personal sense. It is also about the question: who am I in this elusive world? I often have to think back to the book I read in 1966 by Edgar Morin: 'Introduction à une politique de l'homme'.

Protection is also required against climate change. Most people feel that this is probably the greatest threat of all. They fear the abyss but also the means to avoid it. The famous dilemma between the end of the month and the end of the world. Today's problem is that the answers are sometimes so far-

reaching that many people shy away from them. But a lot has already happened: there is a strong decoupling of economic growth and greenhouse gas emissions in the Union. But the next part of the road to a climate-neutral economy is perhaps the most difficult part. Of course technology will help. But it is a little easy to say that citizens should do nothing unless they wait for technology to solve the problem by itself. It is also all too easy to wait until there is a societal basis for a real climate policy. It is an excuse for a lack of leadership and political courage. A general attitude of listening to people is not enough. Listening doesn't mean following. It's even a typical example of populism. Concrete solutions always demand sacrifices, even if they are spread in a socially balanced way.

In the EU we have to deal with the anti-democratic derailments in Hungary, Poland and Romania. If the proceedings against them fail because there is not the necessary unanimity, other sanctions, including financial sanctions, must be taken.

In an atmosphere of insecurity, anything further away from people is also something that evokes a lack of trust. In a tension between 'space' and 'place' (Le Certeau), the 'place' has the advantage of the doubt, although many realise that the solution to our problems makes a larger scale inevitable. The Europe of necessity. The 'space' stands for opportunities, the 'place' for certainty and security. This tension can also be described as the contrast in mentality between the 'movers' and the 'stayers at home'. Many people do not participate actively in globalisation in all its forms and are afraid. The contrast between young and old often coincides with this. These are all variants of the tension between openness and protection.

At the time, people spoke of a world on a human scale. 'Small is beautiful'. That is a positive way of expressing things. Another is: folding back on oneself. The principle of subsidiarity is often poorly understood. It would be tantamount to decentralisation. In fact, it means that for every problem the appropriate level of governance must be sought, with a preference for those who are closest to people. In the European debate, subsidiarity is invoked against a further transfer of national sovereignty. However, it should be borne in mind that European sovereignty can also be lost if one remains locked up at the national level. In the digital economy at global level, it is clear that if the individual countries do not join forces, China and the USA will remain the dominant powers. The EU is lagging behind. In the absence of our own large European companies, we are becoming even more dependent. We can make these American and Chinese companies pay the normal taxes, respect our privacy standards, guarantee loyal competition, but we still leave the technological evolution to others. It is not just about power. It is also about influencing technology that is so important to mankind.

It is true that we can decentralise internally within large entities. Large cities can work with sub-municipalities. In companies, it is also possible to organise consultations on the shop floor, etc. It can itself prevent a great deal of problems. Think of the central management of financial institutions, where in the end only a few people even understood what the company was all about, with all the consequences this had in 2007-2008. Every organisation must have checks and balances. Humanity and efficiency are not necessarily opposites.

The European Union is anything but centrally managed. The member states play an indispensable role. No decision or legislation can be taken against or without them. In fact, most decisions are taken unanimously. The question is whether people in the Member States themselves feel involved in what their country in the Union decides! In general, one should always bear in mind that in every indirect, representative democracy, there is always an alienation in it. The individual loses himself in the masses. The representatives of the people take their responsibility between two elections. A direct democracy is no stranger to alienation either. In referendums, there is a majority and a minority. See how, at Brexit, we stand for a dictatorship of the majority. The 48% 'remainers' are totally forgotten. If one speaks of the will of the people, it is only about the 52% 'leavers'. The result of this disastrous way of

thinking is now visible. The oldest democracy in the world has completely stuck itself. A blocked democracy.

In general, the merciless economic competition between companies and people leads to a hardening of the social climate. This is accompanied by uncertainty and fear. Populists exploit these feelings without making any contribution to a solution. They are on the right on the socio-cultural level but on the left on the socio-economic level. The growing antagonism and aggressiveness is a dangerous development. In civil society there are also numerous counter-forces that put new forms of solidarity first. They react against this hardening and the lack of solidarity. I could also say that there is a fight between Eros and Thanatos. The answer to fear is hope. The power that feeds hope is love, the human quality par excellence.

The European project cannot exist without responsibility, but certainly not without solidarity. However, the EU has a limited scope, among other things because the European budget only represents 1% of the European GDP. Nevertheless as a block, the EU is the largest provider of official development assistance (ODA), 58% of global ODA in 2017.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to demand solidarity for the strengthening of the euro area or the Schengen area. This has a lot to do with the evolution of our national societies and our civilisation. Classic parties also look too much at populist parties and adjust their discourse. But there is also a need for compassion and solidarity outside politics, including on the micro level. Traditional social organisations no longer have a monopoly on this, nor do they have sufficient credibility.

We have not yet found the new synthesis which must, in any case, have a European dimension. Of course, account must be taken of the limits of openness and even of solidarity in the world as it is. A synthesis cannot work in a social vacuum. And yet we must have much more ambition to build more humanity into all facets of our society.