

## ***All Things New and Radical Evolution. Bridging the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> social weeks.***

***Johan Verstraeten, K.U.Leuven***

*International conferences such as European weeks are not islands. They happen in a historical context, and must take that context and its transformation into account.*

*This is not a denying that we also need inspiring ideas, particularly because this year we celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Utopia of Thomas More. In this regard I fully with Lord Maurice Glasman that, without a sense of direction, we erode the very meaning of politics as creation of a space for human flourishing and meaningful living together.*

*But however necessary new ideas might be, they only make sense when they are rooted in reality. A radical evolution must start from an adequate understanding of what is. That is the reason why Pope Francis contends in Evangelii Gaudium that “realities are more important than ideas”. Ideas which are not rooted run the risk to become to alienating ideologies.*

*Consequently, we must take into account that the social reality in Europe today is fundamentally changed since the previous social week in Ostend. “Europe has reached a turning point, civilization shakes” writes Luc Vanderkeelen, a Flemish free mason in the Catholic weekly Tertio.*

*A cluster of interrelated phenomena shakes the foundations of Europe. George Soros even predicts the beak up of Europe if the Union would be incapable of resolving its crisis.*

*In order to demonstrate why this is not an unrealistic prophecy, I will first describe the events that changed the European context since the*

*previous social week and subsequently I will try to discern some positive developments.*

*First of all since the previous social week we are confronted with a migration and refugee crisis unseen since the end of World War II. On the one hand there is the continuing stream of economic migrants from North and Sub-saharan Africa, whose journey often ends tragically: Either in the Mediterranean sea, where already more than 12.000 registered migrants are drown, or, in the jungle of Calais where nothing is left to them than to live in inhuman conditions. Simultaneously there are the more than a million refugees from the Middle East, victims of either the Syrian war or the cruelties of the Islamic state. Many of them have travelled or continue to travel via Turkey overseas to Greece, often facilitated by cynic human traffickers for whom this massive migration has become a several billion Euro's business.*

*Europe's citizens have been for too long indifferent to the tragedy of the refugees, till the picture of a drowned child shocked the moral conscience of the entire continent, a child that is only one of the more than 300 children drown in the last 5 months,.*

*The massive exodus of refugees has become a source of disagreement between EU member states. Many of them refuse to accept a fair share in the distribution of the burdens of hospitality, an attitude underpinned by the imaginary fear of an Islamization of Europe and the loss of cultural or national identity.*

*But we must remain realistic. According to Peter Bouckaert, CEO of human rights watch, even if the stream of refugees continues till 2017 with the same speed, the group of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan will be not bigger than 0,4 % of the European Population. Compare with Lebanon where 25% of the population is refugee!*

*These relativizing figures do not take away the fact that anxiety shakes the very foundation of solidarity among European countries. The Schengen agreement is moreover jeopardized, even to such an extent that former president Nicolas Sarkozy has publicly declared : “Schengen is death”. Such a disastrous self-fulfilling prophecy destroys one of the great achievements of Europe.*

*The problem is, moreover, that in the most hospitable countries the climate has changed. Merkel’s courageous “wir schaffen es” is put into question. Germany is not the same any more after the massive sexual harassment of women on new year’s eve in Cologne. And the controversy about “who are responsible”, has not ended yet. Distrust grows and Scandinavian Countries like Sweden close their borders.*

*The refugee crisis has become a clash of cultures which is often interpreted in religious terms. Gilles Keppel has predicted it years ago as “the revenge of God”, the return of religion in the public square. The situation has paradoxical consequences: even secularists now pleading for the protection of ‘our Christian culture’.*

*A cultural climate of intolerance emerges, with components such as: anti-Islam movements, increasing antisemitism (followed by a still limited but significant exodus of Jews to Israel), and also new forms of intolerance in circles of young fundamentalist Muslims, such as insulting unveiled women or bashing homosexuals.*

*The question is whether the radicalization of young Muslims isn’t a consequence of the fact that their search for respect and meaning gets no other response than the extremist interpretations of the Qur’an by radicalized religious leaders. Where else do they find answer on their journey to make sense of life?*

*The undeniable religious conflict is intensified by two other phenomena which are not necessary religious: terrorism and nationalism.*

*What terrorism is concerned: France, and particularly the French libertarian lifestyle has been until now the main target. While the assassination of members of the editorial board of Charlie Hebdo could still receive some sympathy from people rejecting its blasphemous cartoons, the indiscriminate massive killing of November has had a more general impact. It has not only intensified anti-Islamism, but also produced a more positive outcome, such as more articulated acceptance of the secular state by Muslim leaders, as well as a fundamental conversation about the meaning of a secular state and about the relation between state and religion. Notwithstanding this, we are confronted with the undeniable reality that security has become such an obsession, that the so called new war on terror, risks to erode human and civil rights and thus the fundamentals of the democratic state of law. The idea of an all-embracing surveillance state is no longer science fiction.*

*The fact that the expression ‘we are at war’ has reappeared brings me to a next point: while the fall of the Berlin Wall and communism made us dreaming of a lasting peace, Europe is now again directly confronted with international conflicts, not only with ISIS, but also with Russia. The conflict in Ukraine, the killing by a Russian missile of innocent citizens in a Malaysian Airlines flight, the annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent economic measures at both sides, has created new tensions with Russia, an intensification of Russian nationalism and unrest in the Baltic states. In the meantime the impact of the foreign policy of the EU remains rather marginal and the lack of an integrated European defense policy becomes corn on the mill of Putin’s “divide et impera” politics. Simultaneously the NATO policy leads to a revival of the old Russian fear for being threatened, which is not completely unjustified in the light of the fact that the USA have increased their budget for defense in Europe in a significant way. Hence the official Russian declaration: “the cold war is back”.*

*A further escalation of the conflict must be avoided, not least because without Russia the Syrian conflict will never be resolved.*

*Together with the intensification of international conflicts – to which European countries contribute by continuing to sell directly or indirectly weapons to almost all parties involved, another phenomenon throws oil on the fire: the revival of radical nationalism in general and the growing success of radical nationalist parties in particular. In France the program of Front National is a combination of anti-Islamism and anti-EU slogans, justified by the argument that national sovereignty is in peril. Nationalistic conservatism is prevalent in Hungary and Poland. In other regions separatist movements shake the foundations of the states such as in Scotland, Catalonia and in some regards in Flanders. The reawakening of nationalism is so strong that it has even an impact on the Catholic Church. Recently the Hungarian and Polish bishops have threatened the Comece to give up their membership, of Comece did not withdraw some critical texts from the website of Europe Info, for example an article on the ideology of the new Right in Hungary from their website. This is not only censorship of the worst kind, but an alliance between church and nationalism which contradicts the church's catholicity in a way unseen since the national propaganda committees led by bishops during the first world war. .*

*Proponents of nationalism seem to forget why the EU was created: creating sustainable peace after two disastrous world wars. They also forget the warning by Mitterand in his historical final address to the European Parliament: “le nationalisme c’est la guerre”.*

*All these new or intensified negative tendencies coincide with the reappearance of the risk of a new recession. While we are not yet fully recovered from the previous economic crisis, recent developments do not allow us to be very optimistic. Problems in China and the fall of*

*the price of raw oil, have caused unrest on the stock markets and particularly they re-awakened the fear of a new bank crisis.*

*The inequality gap diagnosed by Piketty is, moreover, confirmed by many studies, and despite some signs of improvement mentioned during the last social week, the economic crisis still affects southern Europe: Greece, Italy, Spain, are still confronted a huge unemployment, especially among the youth. Simultaneously work-pressure and uncertainty among employees, workers and middle managers increases, as well as the numbers of people confronted with burnout and work related depression. Jerome Vignon's analysis during the last social week had lost nothing of its actual value.*

*In the margins of the economic crisis one could also raise the question: whether the radicalization of young Muslims is merely a religious issue, at least when we consider that many of them live in ghetto's with their own often violent subcultures, ghetto's where young Muslims, even with a university degrees do not get a fair access to the labor market. Frustration and humiliation are fertile ground for radicalism.*

*All the issues I mentioned converge in the problem that the EU is weakened, not only because of nationalism or the self-interest of its member states, but also by its democratic deficit and the myopic worldview of a bureaucracy alienated from real life. EU leaders behave like the eternally hesitating Hamlet. They lack leadership at a moment that "To be together or not to be together" is question. And what about the description of the EU by The New York Times as "a narrow minded reality with 28 different shades"?*

*Let me mention a few components of the increased risk of disintegration*

- *The threat of the Brexit: “the prospect of a UK withdrawal from the union and the extend of sympathy with Britain’s criticism of the union in other member states” weakens the union.*
- *The European bureaucracy seems to be still dominated by the ideology of ‘new public management’ instead of playing the role of a genuine civil service adopting a “public value” policy. Apparently it lays much more emphasis on defending the interests of multinationals and agribusiness, than on realizing the social Europe. Symptomatic for this is TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Pact).*
- *The European Parliament is too much influenced by corporate lobbyists.*
- *The Irish work expert John Sweeney diagnoses that –despite Jean Claude Junkers social dialogue program- the enthusiasm for the project of social Europe has cooled because of three major developments: the economic recession and its hugely asymmetric impacts on Member States’ societies; unresolved issues arising from the major enlargement of the Union and the implosion of societies on the Union’s external borders combined with sheer numbers of refugees and economic migrants seeking security or a new life within it.*

*My analysis of the weakening of the EU and its incapacity to find sustainable solutions for the complex crisis is not meant to be a negative prophecy, but it is a warning: we have reached the moment of truth. My point is, that we can’t talk during this social week of ‘all things new and radical evolution’ and continue to speak as if everything is business as usual. We simply can’t discuss our problems in the same way as we did it in the past. Or to say it with Einstein: we can’t resolve our problems with the thinking that caused them.*

*Moments of crisis are, however, not necessarily negative turning points. They can also be, as the Greek root of the word suggest, a*

*moment of reflection and judgment. The task ahead of us is thus to discern how in the happenings, events and longings of today, we can discover positive signs of the time, positive tendencies containing seeds of the future. This is what Otto Scharmer articulates as 'learning from the future as it emerges'. But in order to become conscious of this emergence we must see with new and fresh eyes and act beyond the narrow parameters of a thinking dominated by anxiety. Let me mention a few positive tendencies:*

*First of all, as Zulehner predicted at the end of the previous social week, there is a growing consciousness that climate change intensifies our responsibility for the natural and human environment. Since the 5<sup>th</sup> social week the consciousness of the link between social justice and climate change has become indeed much stronger. Two important facts can be mentioned here: The relatively positive outcome of the Climate conference in Paris and the warm reception of the encyclical "Laudato si" among non-Catholics. Both are an indication of a change of mentality. In this context it is not a detail that Pope Francis articulates in "Laudato si" a clear link between ecological problems and poverty. The poor –and that are the most vulnerable people among us- are the first and primordial victims of climate change, a change that in several regions of the world has an impact on the increase of migration.*

*A second positive tendency, which we already noticed during the 5<sup>th</sup> social week, is a series of surprisingly new and fresh experiments in the world of business and in the civil society. People sharing business interests, creating local energy production, developing new leadership styles etc... But above all there is the new 'new' era in the civil society. Against extreme right movements there is the counter movement of re-awakened solidarity. There is the spontaneous generosity, and bravery, of many volunteers who rescue and take care of people arriving from the sea on Greek islands, people who share houses and goods, people who welcome refugees at train stations,*



*people who go to the Jungle in Calais and initiate programs for the education of children . Such acts of solidarity and community building are signs that something positive is emerging in the civil society, and perhaps it is the emergence of what can be called “civil society or middle field 2.0”. In the process of creating a new type of civil society traditional social movements are challenged by new movements. For example ‘Let’s go urban’ an urban movement for street dance and art which offers to youth from a migrant background opportunities to discover their talents.*

*Also in politics things change. New political movements emerge at the grassroots. They challenge the classical party politics, such as Podemos in Spain.*

*All this new tendencies are, as John Sweeney writes, “a ray of hope and a wake-up call for social Europe “. They are signs of what Kristin Heyer following Izusquiza has called the ‘subversive solidarity’ of a real counter movement of people who build bridges to foster community. They are also remedy to what Pope Francis at Lampedusa called ‘the globalization of indifference’.*

*Last but not least: we learned from the previous social week that there exist and needs to be a creative tension between realism and imagination. Realism that prevents us from becoming blind for the meaning of the fundamental transformations of our society. With a forward looking imagination it becomes possible to see beyond the negative trends how the future emerges.*

*But above all we need in our conversations the same spirit as years ago was expressed by Carl Friedrich Von Weizäcker “Die Zeit Drängt”. There is no room any more for freewheeling. Solution will not fall from heaven and it makes no sense to wait for Godot.*

*The future requires vision, but the present requires radical and reasonable action.*

*Action beyond the safe heavens of the comfort zones of the past. Action rooted in the courage to move beyond the established ways of thinking via new life-giving experiments, which Žižek calls 'acts', acts interrupting the dominant ideological description of reality and its symbolizations, acts that enable us to a fundamental re-description of our social, political and economic realities.*

*But before we can do this we must remember the crucial question about Europe raised by Jacques Delors: "Where do we want to go together?". Without a common sense of direction we will not be capable of realizing the fundamental aim of politics: creating a common space in which all citizens can fully flourish and live a dignified life. If we fail to do this, future generations will hold us responsible.*