

European Culture As a Factor Of Intercivilizational Dialogue

by Helga Zepp-LaRouche

Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche, chairwoman of the Schiller Institute, gave this speech to the Rhodes conference on Sept. 4. Subheads have been added.

Can any thoughtful person today, have the slightest doubt that humanity is facing the greatest threat to its existence in its entire history? Today's global financial system is in its end-phase of collapse, due to its own systemic flaws, the result of the neo-liberal paradigm shift which began about 40 years ago in the Group of Seven nations, and somewhat later in the former Comecon nations, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This paradigm shift has been increasingly moving our focus away from production of real physical goods, and toward pure financial speculation—that is, away from a society of producers, and into a consumer society. And part and parcel of this, is the fact that nobody speaks anymore about the UN's "development decades"; instead, it seems that the so-called industrial nations have accepted it as a given, that part of humanity is doomed to sink into misery, and that the world's leading financial institutions, for example, should simply write off the entire African continent.

There is a certain inner coherence between this systemic collapse, and the growing threat of global nuclear warfare—a threat coming not least from the new American doctrine of preventive nuclear warfare and the use of so-called mini-nukes: an extremely dangerous policy, which is erasing the threshold between deployment of conventional and nuclear weapons. An unbridgeable gap now yawns between these ideas of a unilateral, imperial world order, which treats the emergence of any "multipolarity" among nations as a *casus belli*; and, on the other hand, the idea of a community of sovereign states, based on international natural law.

But even if we do manage to avoid a nuclear catastrophe, we have nevertheless reached the end of an historical epoch, and, thus, the end of the paradigm which has allowed the crisis to worsen to the point that it has. The question before us, is, therefore: Will the new paradigm that is to replace the old one, be marked by the rise of a new barbarism and a new dark age; or, will the world's best minds and powers join together before it is too late, cooperating to effect a transformation into a paradigm that defines a positive alternative for all of humanity?

Two Different Conceptions of Man

If we are to answer that question, we will have to face up to the fact, that within European civilization there have been two diametrically opposed epistemological traditions, one of which is currently dominating our international institutions, and has been responsible for the crisis of civilization today. And then we have the second tradition, in whose ideas and principles we find the initial impetus for overcoming the crisis, and which strike a resonant chord with kindred ideas in other civilizations and cultures.

This latter, positive, Platonic-humanist tradition proceeds from an image of man which conceives of him as an essentially cognitive being, different from all other living creatures by virtue of his capacity for creative Reason. Acting in this tradition, man has the capacity to devise creative hypotheses—hypotheses which, in turn, permit him to continually improve the natural lawfulness of the ordering of the cosmos, and, in so doing, to continually improve the circumstances of human life. Viewed from a political standpoint, this image of man in the Platonic-humanist tradition, is associated with the idea of a state whose legitimacy rests solely on its obligation to foster the general welfare. This idea of man's infinite capacity for self-perfection was first set forth by Plato; and with the advent of Christianity, this same idea, for the first time, was conceived of as applying to all of humanity, in that every human being was considered to be *imago Dei*, in the image of God the Creator. Historically, this idea of a state dedicated to the general welfare first began to be put into practice during the Fifteenth Century, with the emergence of the sovereign nation-state. It was the essential self-interest of this form of state, that all of the citizen's abilities be fostered and developed, because these are the source of wealth for all.

The former tradition, on the other hand, was what Plato referred to in his famous example of the cave. It reduces man to a mere creature, for whom the creative Reason of the world of ideas simply does not exist, and whose only basis for knowledge is the experience of the senses. Such a person perceives reality as if he were sitting in a cave, watching, as shadows of events occurring *outside* the cave, are cast onto an uneven, poorly illuminated wall—and he accepts those shadows as reality. This tradition denies the existence and knowability of universal, validatable principles; and in Euro-

pean history, it has emerged sometimes as positivism, and at other times as empiricism, materialism, or utilitarianism.

This image of man has always been politically associated with oligarchical and imperial forms of state, whereby a tiny power elite would rule over 95% or more of the population, which latter were never allowed to rise above the status of human cattle, and who thus could be slaughtered, culled, and exploited as slaves, as the need arose—as Schiller, for example, describes in the case of the Helots in ancient Sparta. This extreme form of utilitarianism, which today is closely associated with the economic paradigm of the unregulated free market, globalization, “shareholder value” society, etc., has the effect of reducing the large majority of the human species to precisely this degraded status. Already at the conclusion of the 17th Century, Leibniz forecast that if utilitarianism ever succeeded in taking control of all the world’s governments and leading institutions, it would spark a global revolution to overthrow it.

Just as in ancient Rome, today’s imperial forces proceed from the assumption that they can only maintain themselves in power by perpetuating the backwardness and other-directedness of the masses; and it is for this reason, that the majority of the mass media, and especially the entertainment industry, have been increasingly pursuing a policy aimed at the systematic moronization of the population. Today’s political institutions are largely dominated by oligarchical principles, and the popular masses seem to want to affirm this mode of thought imposed upon them, according to which man is merely a creature of sense-perception, by wallowing in their seemingly never-ending pursuit of money, their object-fixation, and their addiction to the pleasures of the here and now. Indian scholars rightly criticize the West for having become entirely dominated by *pavrrti*, i.e., of acting only on the basis of externalities, without any development of the spirit or intellect, or *nivrrti*.

And here I would like to present the thesis, that the European part of world civilization—which historically includes not only Europe, but also the United States and Central and South America—will only find the strength to make it out of the current crisis, if we succeed in uniting the necessary economic reforms—i.e., a reorientation of economic policy away from an elite’s boundless greed for profit, and toward



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an orientation to the general welfare—with a *cultural Renaissance* which builds upon the best ideas of the Platonic-humanist tradition and the Classical periods in Europe’s history.

Schiller’s Relevance Today

I think that in the works of European culture’s great poets and thinkers, discoverers and artists, we can find all the ideas necessary for us today. From the standpoint of their methodology, Plato, St. Augustine, Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolaus of Cusa, Kepler, Leibniz, Bach, Gauss, Mozart, Beethoven, Riemann, Vernadsky, to name only a few, have, in principle, already thought everything that is necessary today to bring the world back into order. But I would be hard put to find, among these great minds of the past, one whose ideas have greater importance for overcoming today’s existential crisis, than the German Poet of Freedom, Friedrich Schiller. His concept that every individual human being has the potential to develop into a Beautiful Soul, is an idea of more vital importance today, than ever before. As Schiller writes in his Fourth Aesthetic Letter: “Every individual man, one can say, carries by predisposition and destiny, a purely ideal man within himself, to agree with whose immutable unity in all his alterations is the great task of his existence.”

Now, I can already hear the squeals of protest from certain quarters: “But today’s *Zeitgeist* is completely different! Schil-

ler's cultural optimism and idealism became obsolete a long time ago! And anyway, Nietzsche already settled the Schiller question; and besides, how can you believe, after the experiences of Germany's 12-year catastrophe, that such a 'pure idealistic man' of whom Schiller speaks, can possibly exist?" So chants this chorus—the only problem being that its voices all reflect the same paradigm which is just about to go under.

Schiller has razor-sharp relevance for today, because during his own era, he had to come to grips with the question of where improvement in the political domain was to come from, at a time when governments were corrupt and the masses degenerate. And he came to the recognition, which is still valid today, that any improvement in the political domain, could only be achieved through the ennoblement of the individual. Schiller describes the fractured spiritual condition of the people of his era, in terms virtually identical to what we see today: "Now however, Want rules and sunken humanity bends under its tyrannical yoke. *Utility* is the great idol of the time, for which all powers slave and all talents should pay homage," he wrote in his Second Aesthetic Letter. And in his Sixth Letter, he goes on to describe the person who is ensnared within the world of materialism: "We do not see merely the individual subject, but rather entire classes of men unfold only a part of their natural gifts, while the rest, as with stunted plants, scarcely are suggested with a faint trace." And: "Eternally chained to only a single fragment of the whole, man only develops himself as a fragment; eternally only the monotonous noise of the wheel that he revolves, in the ear; he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of impressing humanity upon his nature, he becomes merely an imprint of his business, of his science." So, what can we do, when the *Zeitgeist* is yanking most people downward into the realm of mere physical existence and sensual experience?

Many philosophers have struggled with the question of how man's Reason can be developed. But Schiller's special contribution consists precisely in his development not only of Reason *per se*, but also of a *method* whereby man is able to ennoble his emotions. He views it as nothing less than the world-historical goal of human development, "to establish an inner agreement between his two natures (the sensual and the cognitive), to always be a harmonious unity, and, with his full-voiced humanity, to act."

And thus, for Schiller, the Beautiful Soul is the pinnacle and highest aim of human development. A Beautiful Soul is a person for whom Freedom and Necessity, duty and passion merge into a unity, such that a person so educated, can always blindly trust his own emotions, because those emotions would never urge upon him anything other than what his Reason dictates. Schiller describes this very beautifully in his "Kallias" letters, with the example of the Good Samaritan, who spontaneously comes to the aid of another in distress, without giving even a moment's thought to his own situation and interests.

The Concept of the Sublime

But precisely because human beings are, from an emotional standpoint, like "stunted plants," the "education of the emotional faculties" (*Empfindungsvermögen*) is "our era's most urgent need." And isn't that one of the main problems we have today? Excessive demand for sensual gratification, which goes hand-in-hand with clinging to one's identity in the world of sense-experience—i.e., the desire to satisfy one's own ego—are today, unfortunately, coupled with brutal indifference toward the needs of a suffering humanity. While the pitiable condition of the overwhelming majority of humankind continues to outrage those who are thoughtful and empathetic, calling upon them to act, the majority simply lacks the strength of imagination required to lift their thoughts and feelings above the minuscule confines of their own personal lives. And if you come upon such a person and ask him to confront those greater issues, a psychological "block" immediately kicks in, and he answers, "I don't go there!"

The problem is that a person whose identity is confined exclusively to the realm of his own sense-experience, of his own physical existence, will invariably react with fear, whenever he comes to the realization that his own physical existence is threatened.

It is for this reason, that Schiller's concept of the Sublime is of crucial importance for educating the emotional faculties (*Empfindungsvermögen*). "As sentient creatures, we are dependent, but as cognitive beings, we are free," says Schiller in his essay "On the Sublime." "As a sentient creature, our self-preservation instinct comes into play the moment something makes us fearful, or the pain of a physical injury terrifies us, and our attempt to wall ourselves off in order to preserve our physical existence, turns us into slaves."

And in his second essay on the same subject, titled "Concerning the Sublime," Schiller writes: "All other things must 'must'; but man is the being who wills. Precisely for this reason, nothing is so unworthy of man, as to suffer violence, for violence annuls him. Who does it to us, disputes nothing less than our humanity; who suffers it in a cowardly manner, throws away his humanity." And there are also these remarkable lines he wrote in 1801: "People could be developed into demi-gods, if only we sought, through education, to rid them of all fear. Nothing in the world can make a person unhappier, than fear, pure and simple."

Schiller's answer lies in placing one's identity onto the level of the Sublime, something which is only possible when the human being is not limited by his physical existence, but has a sense of responsibility toward universal ideas and principles which reach beyond the confines of his own personal life. Only when he can view his moral, and not his sensual nature as his life's primary mission, can he put his sensual nature in check, and give his cognitive nature the upper hand. The person who has learned how to think and to feel on the level of the Sublime, will also not succumb to the

fear of death, but will, even during his limited life-span, live in immortality. “*Great* is he who defeats what is fearsome; *sublime* is he who, even as he perishes by it, fears it not,” says Schiller.

“The capacity to let the Sublime enter into one’s emotional life, is also one of human nature’s most magnificent potentials,” says Schiller, because it makes him perfectly free. Schiller regards Beauty as a necessary precondition for humanity; but Beauty only encompasses the world of the senses. Therefore, “the Sublime must be joined with the beautiful, in order to make *aesthetic education* into a completed whole, and to broaden the human heart’s capacity to take in emotions to the full extent of our endowment, and, thus, beyond the world of the senses.”

The use of poetry and Classical art, not as pillows to shield us from harsh reality, but rather as the pathway over which man can truly, and in reality, become free—this was Schiller’s idea. The average woman, or the average man who enters the theater, and sees the great destiny of all mankind portrayed there on the stage, will be lifted out of the narrow confines of his or her daily life. When historical drama lives up to this Classical standard set by Schiller, the members of the audience identify with the heroes on the stage, upon whose actions depends the fate of their nation, and the happiness or misery of their people, often for generations hence; and so, in play, as it were, they learn to think more greatly, more on the level of the Sublime.

And for that reason, the old paradigm which is responsible for today’s crisis, has one aspect which is particularly harmful, namely, *Regietheater*; i.e., the arbitrary, modernistic interpretation of Classical theater works, a practice which ultimately goes back to Berthold Brecht. The so-called alienation effect and other devices are explicitly intended to *prevent* the public from identifying with the great issues transpiring on the stage. Everything is made questionable, everything is turned into a farce and relativized, and with the expected result: hopelessness and cynicism. And cynicism is the death of creativity.

Schiller was absolutely conscious of the fact that on the contrary, enthusiasm is the most important driving force of creative action. And this is why he stressed how important it is to keep the ideals of one’s childhood raised high, even into old age. Schiller’s cultural optimism and idealism are the diametric opposite of other-worldly utopian castles in the sky; they are ideas which are the necessary precursors of action, if the course of history is to have a positive outcome.

Your idea of humanity can never grow too big; Just as it is in your breast, so you forge it in action.

A Vision of Immortality

It is precisely this outlook of Schiller which we need today: not dry pragmatism which reconciles itself to a reality which is bad enough already, and from which nothing new

has ever come; but rather, a great idea of how the world shall be. A vision for the future, which will inspire people and prod them into positive action, is what will bring humankind forward. “Live with this century, but do not become its creature,” Schiller says in his “Aesthetic Letters.”

Only when man elevates himself above the seemingly self-evident (the world of sense-perception), can he discover the universal, validatable principles corresponding to the universe as it is in reality. For artistic endeavor, Schiller adds explicitly: “The laws of art are not grounded in the passing forms of an accidental, and often entirely degenerated popular taste, but rather in the necessary and the eternal within human nature, in the primordial laws of the human mind. From the divine part of our being, from the eternally pure ether of idealistic humanity, the limpid stream of beauty flows downward, untouched by the spirit of the age, whirling away far underneath in turbid eddies.”

This idea that the “primordial laws of the human mind” have a direct correspondence with the ultimately just universal order, are deeply Platonic and Cusan (in the sense of Nicolaus of Cusa). Herein lies the reason why man can overcome the Tragic, and, even as he perishes, can achieve a sublime closing upon his divine destiny, and thus, immortality.

Afraid of death, are you? Want to be immortal? Live in the Whole! Long after you’re gone, it will remain.

The idea that man can “throw off the fear of earthly things,” and can locate his identity in immortality, is a thread running through the poet’s entire work. An important means to accomplish this, Schiller argues, is the study of universal history, because only the person who knows how to cherish how much all the battles, personal sacrifices, and spending of lives by all generations that have come before, were necessary to secure our own existence, and to create all the wealth we possess today—only such a person will experience a noble yearning to contribute to passing these received treasures, enriched and increased, onward to posterity, and, thereby, firmly linking “our fleeting existence” to the eternal chain of all peoples and all times.

The words which Schiller spoke in 1789 to his students in Jena, continue to be true for us today: “However different the destinies may be which await you in civil society, all of you can contribute something to this! A path toward immortality has been opened up to every achievement—and I mean to true immortality, where the deed lives and hurries forward, even should the name of its author remain behind.”

Living in Universal History

Schiller’s concept of universal history—namely, the idea that *all* events up to that very moment, were necessary in order to explain why we all are sitting together here in this room today—is, in my view, the very best way to organize a dialogue of cultures. If one proceeds from the basis of universal history, it becomes evident that it has never been just one

culture or one nation which has carried the torch of human progress, but rather it was sometimes this one, and sometimes that one. And it will also become clear, that great, universal ideas which have been thought by one thinker in one culture, have been borne across the centuries, taking root in other cultures, where they have germinated in the ideas of other thinkers.

For example: The most recent archaeological discovery of a 9,500-year-old city in the Gulf of Khambhat, 30 kilometers west of the state of Gujarat [in India], and submerged 36 meters below the ocean surface, has enormous implications for the investigation of universal history. Because this great city, 5,000 years older than comparable great cities in ancient Mesopotamia, confirms descriptions found in the early *Rig Veda* writings of cities along the Sarisvati River—which no one had even thought was located in India, and whose existence was only first discovered from space, by means of satellite photos. Now, what does this discovery say about the role of Vedic culture for human civilization as a whole?

There were many phases of cultural flourishing in Indian culture, stretching from the time of the Vedic calendar, the origin of the Upanishads, through the Gupta period, and all the way into the renaissance at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. In China, Confucius founded one of world culture's great philosophical traditions, and he was followed by Mencius and Zhu Xi, and great works of art, especially in the Tang and Song dynasties. Emperor Kang-shi was praised by Leibniz for his mathematical knowledge. Egypt, the true cradle of European culture, had many phases of high culture, especially the Third Dynasty of the Old Empire, but also the 4th, 12th, 19th, and 20th dynasties.

After Classical Greece collapsed because it had changed itself into an empire; and after the collapse of the Roman Empire; and after Europe descended into a dark age; the caliphs of the Abbasid Dynasty organized the Islamic Renaissance, which saved European culture, and, via Harun al-Rashid's ties to Charlemagne, brought it back into Europe. The Andalusian and Italian Renaissance, and the German Classic era, were still other phases of cultural flourishing. It would take me way beyond the bounds of this presentation, if I were to attempt to even come close to giving a complete picture.

The point I am concerned with here, is that the dialogue of cultures must be conducted from the standpoint of the best contributions which each culture has made. Because then we will see how right Schiller was, when he said that the thread of universal ideas, in science, in philosophy, and in art, runs through all of human history, and that, once one has recognized this common universal characteristic, our variety and diversity represents a fantastic enrichment of us all.

And so it is no accident that, for example, the Upanishads' ancient concept of the essential unity of all religions and all spiritual paths—“*ekoham svat virpa bahuda vadanti*” (“The Truth is One; it is only that the wise men have given it different

names”)—reappears in Cusa's idea that the One represents a higher order than the Many. Yet another Vedic concept, the “Welfare of all living creatures on this planet” (“*bahujana shukaya bahujana hitaya cha*”), finds its corresponding expression in the European idea of eternal justice and natural law, which establishes the right to the best possible development of all.

Cusa's idea that there can only be concord in the macrocosm, when all microcosms develop in the best possible way, must also be true for relations among this world's nations and cultures. This must be the basis for a new world order, of a community of principle of perfectly sovereign nation-states. Peace will only be possible, if everyone is able to develop their potential in the best way, and if everyone also sees it as in their own interest, that others be enabled to do the same. The goal of the dialogue is not do define some dogma, of who is right and who is wrong, but rather to study the universal science of mankind's potential to develop. And it is only through this dialogue, that its participants will become better people.

In Indian philosophy, the notion of *nivrtti* signifies that man must grasp more deeply his inner being, and must find his identity beyond the ego of the senses, in his greater self—an approximation of the idea of the Sublime. The education of the *nivrtti* roughly corresponds to the education, the *Empfindungsvermögen*, of our emotional faculties.

Toward a New Renaissance

Our preoccupation with these concepts is by no means a purely academic question. To return to the beginning of my presentation: We are on the threshold of existential social upheavals, and there is no way that the old existing order can remain intact. And it has never been clearer how right Schiller was, when he repeatedly pointed to the effectiveness of Nemesis throughout the course of history—such as today in Iraq. A war built entirely on the basis of lies, which has violated every tenet of international law, has turned into Nemesis for those who started it. But unfortunately, this does not lessen the threat to world peace, but on the contrary, it increases it dramatically.

In this situation, where tectonic movements are burying the old world order underneath, leaving in its place either chaos, or space for a new world order, it is only when sufficient numbers of men and women, political leaders and statesmen, can be found, who can locate their identity on the level of the Sublime, that opportunity will emerge from this crisis.

It is my deep conviction, that if, in the midst of this deep crisis, we can actualize the best traditions of all this world's cultures, especially calling them to life among our nations' youth; and if, in the immediate future, we can not only establish a new, just world economic order, but also can unite this with such a dialogue of cultures; then what awaits us is a Renaissance far richer than any that has come before.