

**Keynote Speech Josette Baer, Bratislava, 15 November 2016,  
10.00 hod., Hotel Saffron**

Dear fellow academics, ladies and gentlemen,

As a scholar working on Central and Eastern European political thought and a European at heart, I was flattered beyond belief when I received the invitation to speak at this conference.

I am Swiss, a *citoyenne* of the oldest democracy in Europe, whose citizens stubbornly refuse to join the EU. Let me therefore thank the Slovak organizers for the invitation – to my university of Zurich UZH and to me, it is, indeed, a great honour to speak to you today.

Why are the Humanities important? Why are they important for Europe? And what challenges has European academe to face in the near future? I think there are two principal challenges that are mutually linked: recruitment and job security. We can recruit future researchers and university teachers only if we offer the talented students a viable career and we can convince them to embark on an academic career only if we can offer them the funds that make their employment at university secure. You can't do cutting-edge research worrying all the time about money, where to apply for the next grant a week after you have received one that

shall finance you for a couple of months! You need a clear head to focus on your research– and that means financial security, at least for 3 to 4 years.

I don't want to bore you with figures; I'd like to present three examples from my fifteen years of teaching experience. As a witness of how Switzerland's academic institutions changed with the adoption of the Bologna system in 2006, I am familiar with both academic systems, the one prior to Bologna and the Bologna system. I'll get back to Bologna and academe's principal challenges at the end of my brief speech.

Now, in medias res: My three examples are, indeed, related to the title and theme of this conference. They address three problems I deem highly important for us university teachers to counteract as negative tendencies or trends: first, the failure to understand the importance, that is, the significance of the context, or thinking in contexts; second, the painful lack of scholarly procedure, that is, scholarship, or the rules of the trade; and third, the acute lack of general basic education, what we refer to as *mancanza d'istruzione generale*, in Slovak *nezbytnosť všeobecné vzdelanie*.

### **Example Number 1 – The Lack of Context**

Ten years ago, I taught a seminar on “The Cold War – ideologies, mindsets and political programmes”; some thirty BA and MA students showed up. The room was packed. In the session about the workers' uprising in East Berlin in 1953, I showed

the students the Red Star of the Soviet Army. I ask: "What does this star mean in the context of the Cold War?" - A student pipes up - "It's the Star of David - the national emblem of Israel". I am really shocked, but I reply: "No, the red star is the emblem of the Soviet Red Army. The star of David has six, not five points."

This example demonstrates that the student did not think in the context of the Cold War. Without reflecting, she answered on the spot, emotionally, impulsively - a shot in the dark. Although the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 was an event connected to the Cold War, the student's answer was wrong, since she failed to make the connection between the crushing of the East Berlin workers' uprising and the Red Army.

### **Example Number 2 - The Lack of Scholarship:**

In the spring term of 2013, I taught my seminar on Raymond Aron's *Opium of the Intellectuals*. One of the six MA students - most of them studying Poli Sci, a couple doing Philosophy - was an avid user of marihuana. He attended class every week, but was consistently and constantly stoned, so much so that he used to hang in his chair, had his head on the table buried in his arms, and I thought 'ok, Mr XY is asleep again'. Yet, he was not asleep, he was listening. And, at the end of term in June, he submitted a quite decent end-of-term paper. The paper was somewhat superficial, but that was not his fault: how can an MA student possibly research in depth, if he has only ten pages? Ten pages for six credit points. A couple of months later, I receive an email from this student: "Dr Baer, I've come up with a fantastic

topic for my MA thesis, which I'd like you to supervise – it's about a Soviet economist, a contemporary of Bukharin, and this economist came up with a stellar new idea about how to organize and render more effective the Soviet planned economy." I had never heard of this economist, so I googled him on Marxists.com. Fine, this economist did exist. So, I reply to my student: "Go ahead, if you read Russian; if you don't read Russian, I am sorry, I can't act as the supervisor of your MA thesis." I never heard from him again.

This example demonstrates that the student was interested, perhaps even passionate about Soviet planned economics, but he ignored the fact that you have to be able to read sources in the original language. He thought that consulting Internet resources of translated documents would suffice. The student was not aware of scholarly procedure, that you actually have to analyse your sources – and to do that, you must be in command of the language, in this case Russian.

### **Example Number 3 – general knowledge – *istruzione generale, všeobecné vzdělání***

In the spring term of 2015, I taught Nikolai Danilevskii's famous *Rossija i Evropa* (*Russia and Europe*), which is the key Russian political text of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a blueprint of Tsarist Imperialism and Panslavism alike. In the first session, after my PowerPoint introduction which explained the historical context of Russian Imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I ask: "Who of you has read 'War and Peace' by Lev Tolstoi?" Not one. The students looked at me with big eyes. Again I was rather

shocked, thinking what do they teach the pupils at high school? *War and Peace* is world literature.

You see, that is what I earlier referred to as *mancaza d'istruzione generale*, or the lack of general knowledge we university teachers face on a daily basis. We simply can no longer assume that the students enrolling at our faculty have a certain basic general knowledge. In my seminar about Czech and Slovak political thinkers, more than half of the students were not familiar with the name of Alexander Dubček, and those who had heard of him thought that he was Czech!

It is not my task here to blame anybody, and I often have to remind myself that this young generation did not witness the Cold War as my generation did, born in the 1960s. Yet, as an expert overseeing the annual Matura exams in the Canton of Zurich, I am confronted every June with the educational level of the pupils in the subjects of History and German Literature. The Matura students – with a few exceptions – are unable to express themselves elegantly and correctly in German, which is Switzerland's language of instruction in the German-speaking part of our country. The pupils' grammar is terrible, and what I deplore most is the general somewhat arrogant attitude that the Humanities are not important, since with a Humanities degree you won't make any money! The pupils consider the Humanities a superfluous and negligible nuisance, they don't understand the concept of education – *Bildung*, critical thinking that is so important for politics, especially for democratic states. This general decline is compounded by the

prevalence of new technology, smart phones and social networks. My teaching assistant told me that the young – I am talking here about students aged from 18 to 23 – are communicating on these devices in Swiss dialect, since it's their language of communication: spending hours daily on Facebook or Twitter or whatever, I am not surprised they have a hard time to understand linguistically Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*. It's simply an issue of language training. And it is also a serious issue of concentration. At the said Matura exams, I noticed that after roughly ten minutes, the students get nervous, begin to sweat, can't finish their thoughts, fiddle with their hands – and even forget the teacher's question – because they are so used to looking at their Twitter or Facebook page every few minutes. So, to focus for 15 minutes is already a challenge for them.

Now, how do these three problems relate to the aforementioned Bologna system of university education?

I am very happy for my students that they have now easier access to universities abroad; the Erasmus programme facilitates international exchange, and many students benefit from a term at a university abroad. Also, the students have the possibility of getting a BA, a university degree in 3 years, which facilitates the planning of their professional career, since many have neither the stamina nor the interest of being at university for 6 years.

The tuition fees at my UZH are ridiculously low, some 600 Swiss Francs per term. A comparison: I had had the honour to teach at the University of Washington at the prestigious Henry M. Jackson school of International Studies in Seattle, USA,

from 2001 to 2004 – the students back then had to pay \$ 20'000 per term and that was a state-subsidized university – not an Ivy League Uni financed by private donations.

The Bologna education system is geared to skills, not education. My students, whether they like it or not, have to comply with the rules and they act very rationally: during their three years of MA studies, they are hunting for credit points. It's almost like the hunt for pokemons, hit and miss; I want to go to Dr Baer's seminar on Hannah Arendt, but if I miss it, then I'll go to Prof XY's seminar on Wittgenstein – they go for maximum credit points and neglect their personal interests. That is the reason why many are not motivated, doing the minimum.

A few remarks about the incentives for a career in academe: I think, and this is of course my subjective opinion, that we could improve the low number of students willing to embark on an academic career if we were able to offer them job security, which is an issue of institutional organization.

We researchers really don't need the mushrooming bureaucracy that came along with the Bologna system: we don't need evaluation by the students every term – and the students don't like to evaluate their teachers – they are at university to study – that's what my students keep telling me. Neither do we researchers need constant quality control – everybody with a PhD knows what he or she wants to research as a postdoc – we really don't need bureaucratic boards that scrutinize

our achievements on an ongoing basis. Scaling down the costs of the bureaucracy would open up funds we could invest in the next generation of university teachers and researchers.

I often hear that we teachers are encouraged to think of our students as clients, much as if the university were a private company. But, education doesn't work like a private company – how to quantify knowledge and how to pay according to professional achievement? If university worked like a private company – the tuition fees should be a lot higher. Taxpayers finance a state university, that is why the tuition fees at my UZH are low – but, at the same time, we university teachers are being told by the admin that we should treat the students as clients – this doesn't add up! On the one hand, education should be accessible to everybody, which involves the state, and on the other, the private economy has to absorb all these graduates, while young people with vocational training are more and more neglected in the job market.

Let me finish with the principal question: Why are the Humanities important? The answer is really banal:

Democracy is a political system that requires educated citizens who can tell apart manipulation, polemics and real, sound political arguments. The great *citoyen* of Geneva and the political philosopher I most admire Jean-Jacques Rousseau called it “religion civile” – a codex of behaviour for citizens engaged in making the state,

embodying democracy on a daily basis. The better educated the *citoyens*, the better their democracy. This was also the message of Thomas G. Masaryk, the only democratic president in Central Europe in the interwar years.

I thank you for your attention.