

THOSE WERE THE DAYS

Speech delivered by Afif Safieh on the occasion of the inaugural session of the Global Festival celebrating the Centenary Year of The London School of Economics at the invitation of the Student Union – Monday, 6th February 1995.

Ladies & Gentlemen

Of the many duties I have had to undertake here in London during the last four years, your invitation today will probably be the one I will remember, in the future, with the greatest tenderness and affection.

Having been successively, some two decades ago, president of both the Belgian, then the French, sections of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), your invitation has plunged me in nostalgic recollections of what is supposed to have been the golden age of the international student movement: from Berkeley to Belgium and Berlin, from Paris to Prague.

Those were the days, my friends, when we reinvented the world and the future almost every day. Voracious readers, we used to engage in sleepless nights and endless talk about the ideal society. Some of us were ready to die in bringing about their ideals. Others wanted simply to live them. Schools of thought proliferated and they all revolved around the idea of social change and – yes, already then – a new international system. Some thought change in the centre would be decisive while others considered changes in the periphery to be the recommended course of action. Some regarded the working classes in the industrialised nations to be the major agents of change while others looked upon the peasantry of the Third World as the vehicle of social transformation. Some argued that the State, which had to become a neutral body based on meritocracy, will assume this function by being the guarantor, the regulator and the redistributor within society while Herbert Marcuse, one of my generation's favourite authors flattered our egos with his theory that in our contemporary society, where we witness the embourgeoisement of the proletariat and the continuing conservatism of the peasantry, students, and only the students, were the sole agent of the desirable change. Students, those future intellectuals, were a topic Antonio Gramsci had addressed with great eloquence. Advocating a special relationship between the oppressed and the intelligentsia he called for “an alliance between those who think because they suffer and those who suffer because they think”.

So we thought and thought and I am sure that our elders must have suffered when hearing us think aloud. But that is altogether another story.

Our slogans then reflected “l'air du temps”:

- “L'imagination au pouvoir”.
- “Le droit à la différence”. The right to be different.
- “Il est interdit d'interdire”. It is forbidden to forbid.

A favourite among many was:

“Le droit à la paresse”. The right to be lazy, which incidentally referred to the legitimacy and desirability of general strikes rather than the appealing notion of dolce vita based on fare niente.

“Il faut s’occuper de la politique sinon la politique s’occupera de vous”. You should take care of politics or else politics will take care of you.

And the last that I will quote:

“Politics is too important to be left to politicians”.

Each of us had his or her heroes and maitre(s) a penser. Some became dogmatic and doctrinaire. But great intellectual diversity and tolerance was the major feature of those times. I was, what we used then to call, eclectic, belonging to no chapel, no clique or clan. Because of my historical and sociological background, Jesus and Mohammed had undeniable influence on my intellectual upbringing. The principles of “liberté-fraternité-égalité” and the French Revolution itself had exercised a great fascination on me. As a Palestinian who favoured Arab unity, I showed an early interest in Bismarck, Cavour and Garibaldi, Jamal Abdel Nasser but also in Jean Monnet. I read Marx, in depth, and never became a Marxist myself yet had often to protect him from frequent misinterpretations, distortions and mutilations of some of his disciples just as many of us have frequently to proclaim God’s innocence of beliefs and behaviours perpetrated on His/Her behalf. Let us not forget that Jewish fundamentalists have transformed God into some sort of real estate agent.

I devoted much time to Lenin and Mao, finishing an MA thesis in the very Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium – in fact the oldest Catholic University in the world established in 1425 – on “Revolutionary strategies and the conquest of power, a comparative study of the Bolshevik and Maoist revolutions”, yet had a special weakness towards those who encountered a tragic fate: Che Guevara, J.F.K. and Martin Luther King, or were maltreated by History and by their contemporaries: Leon Trotsky or had conquered power only to abandon it voluntarily: Emiliano Zapata.

To add to the irritation of some of my friends, I remained totally unswayed and unmoved by the Chinese cultural revolution and openly preferred Chou en lai the State-builder, the technocrat to the unattractive and constantly intriguing manipulative agitator Lui Piao.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this list would be incomplete if I were to omit my obsession with and observation of De Gaulle, this Western leader that Stanley Hoffman had called “un artiste de la politique”. He had had to struggle, brilliantly, against foes and friends alike to maintain the rank of France undiminished after its devastating defeat in 1940. The analogy with the Palestinian re-emerging national movement would not have escaped you. His tumultuous relationship with that other giant – Winston Churchill – would keep me awake night after night. Churchill had summarised this complex rapport by saying: “of the many crosses I have had to carry, the Cross of Lorraine was surely the heaviest”. (The Cross of Lorraine being, of course, the symbol of the French Resistance). Again, regional analogies were obvious.

My fascination with De Gaulle was responsible for some of my most tormenting moments. I was, then, in total solidarity with the French student movement but this movement was irreparably destabilising De Gaulle. Anyway, even his abdication was done with such grandeur that his place in history – undiminished and unstained – was preserved for posterity.

In 1972, I moved from Belgium to the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Paris and got

involved in discussions on the nature and the scope of Political Science itself. Some of you present here today would remember that as a relatively new discipline Political Science was still struggling to assert itself and its domain. So we still called it then “Political Sciences”, in the plural, seeing it as a sort of interdisciplinary field, it is true dealing with the study of the State, of Government and of power in general, but encompassing History, International Relations, Sociology and Economics with very unclear demarcation lines. In Anglo-Saxon countries they had no problem describing students of and experts in political science: a political scientist, but in the French-speaking world even that was subject for debate and dissent. Some called him/her a “politiste”, others preferred “politologue” yet others favoured “politicologue”. The jokers would simply say “les sciences poseurs”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this was the flavour of those times. We were then young and audacious, questioning everything and everyone. We were the world “en miniature” with an experimental “global village” mentality. We were one, yet, in every sense, plural. We shared values and dreams and were endeavouring hard to reconcile our respective cultural authenticities with what we thought was modernity, to reconcile our respective political specificities with what we hoped was universality. Universality for us was surely not the American way of life or Western hegemony but an elusive and yet to be defined constellation of ideas and values enriched by the many inputs of every culture and civilisation. I am sure that the quest for “that universality” still goes on today in this university and elsewhere too.

Yes, we were one and plural: proud nationalists, profoundly internationalists, totally cosmopolitan. With the student movement on the ascendancy, catalysed by the Vietnamese tragedy, the 1967 war took place in the Middle East resulting in the humiliating defeat of the Arab armies and the Palestinian reawakening. Israel, in a continuing process of elastic expansion, dispossession and dispersion, occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in addition to the Sinai and the Golan. A whole generation of Palestinian students were trapped abroad and when Israel conducted a demographic census, we all became legally non-existent. This student community became the new wandering Palestinians. Many of us were already active in resurrecting the Palestinian National Movement around Yasser Arafat and his colleagues. Now most joined in, becoming a major affluent within the PLO.

Already in those days many of our friends were Jews. They were anti-Zionists or non-Zionists. The West, then, was a cemetery for those in politics, in the media or in academia who dared question Israel’s intentions or dare condemn its policies and practices. Reputations were ruined, careers were shattered and character assassination was the name of the game. Israel felt immune to criticism and the most unacceptable intellectual terrorism prevailed, as a powerful deterrent. Philippe de St Robert wrote that he received a letter from one of his readers saying “you are an objective writer but when Israel is concerned impartiality is unwelcomed”. So some of the best critical books or articles were then mainly written by Jewish scholars. But even they would not escape insults and abuse. “Self-hating Jews” would be one of the mildest. The most radical among them would question the very legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine while the more moderate believed that the creation of a Palestinian State was a Jewish moral obligation, a Jewish ethical responsibility. I still remember, with enormous political gratitude, Rabbi Elmer Berger, Alfred Lilienthal of “What price Israel?” and of course Naom Chomsky in the USA. In Belgium, Marcel Liebeman and Nathan

Wienstock. In France Ania Francos, Ilan Halevy and Maxime Rodinson and what was then the highly needed eye-opener in intellectual circles his “Israel: a colonial settler State”. In the UK, Eli Lobel, Moshe Machover, Uri Davis and Isaac Deutscher. Deutscher in his criticism of the “Prussians of the Middle East” offered a parable of his own to make comprehensible the human dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Putting aside the calculations of politicians and the machinations of states, he said that this conflict was between a person who had to jump from a building on fire but landed on another person whose back he broke. Each time the second person moaned in pain or tried to stand up again, he would receive a beating for fear of revenge or claims for compensation.

A prominent French Jewish intellectual visited Israel during those years and returned profoundly disturbed by the arrogance and the macho military mentality he encountered. I will never forget his remark then: “These Israelis are no more Jews”.

“These Israelis are no more Jews”, an interesting statement that deserves one day some further elaboration.

Ladies and Gentlemen, rightly or wrongly, we were then considered a generation of adorable or of exasperating dreamers, rightly or wrongly, the generations who followed were perceived as more disciplined, more career-orientated. But there were a few exceptions, among others the Palestinian students of the West Bank and Gaza who played a leading role during the first years of the Intifada. They were models of self sacrifice to whom the entire nation is eternally indebted.

Some decades ago, Daniel Bell followed by Raymond Aron predicted “the end of ideologies”. Years later, the end of history itself was announced to which Andre Fontaine, in a beautifully worded article in *Le Monde*, responded by saying: “if it is true that we witness the end of history, then we are living the beginning of boredom”.

The way you have decided to celebrate the 100th anniversary of your Alma Mater, the theme – Globalism – that you have chose for the centenary festival, proves that we are not, definitely not, witnessing the end of idealism.