

Speech by Teodor Münz

on the occasion of commencement of the graduates of Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA)
on June 24, 2010

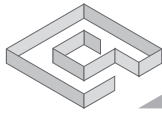
Honorable ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and students,

I accepted this invitation from your school with great pleasure in order to say a few words upon the occasion of your graduation. You are, however, political scientists and I am philosopher, an older philosopher. When I was graduating, the existence of a school such as the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts was unthinkable. Fortunately, this era is behind us. You live, study and will work in a democracy; you have freedom of thought and expression; and the world is wide open for you.

This is not to say that it's all a walk in the park. Such a system is the stuff of dreams. We know very well that even democracy has its pitfalls. And capitalism, with which it came, leaves much to be desired as well. You will keep encountering and fighting these pitfalls and challenges. I think that capitalism together with democracy has deepened certain contradictions and inconsistencies that have existed in societies for a long time. These systems made a man independent and told him: "Enough of command, you are free, take care of yourself; you have certain skills - use them. What you'll win in this fight will be yours." By this, they legalized and codified the natural and inherent inequality among people, inequality of skills in acquiring favourable economic, political, social, cultural and other positions. As Nietzsche would say, inequality in the struggle for power.

People are, however, not the same, neither morally nor in their character, and we know how this tends to end. Those who are weaker, if morally a bit superior, will not get their share of the benefits, complaints arise, rebellions and revolutions emerge, because this is one of the oldest and most painful problems of mankind. This situation has long been expressed in religious terms by the Apostle Paul when – in his Letter to the Romans – he stated that God does not judge people according to their deeds, but he chooses some for a life of honour and some for a life of dishonour even before they are born, and thus He distributes gifts by His grace and predestination. When we translate these words into a secular language, we find an endorsement of natural human inequality.

On the other hand, we hear that we are all equal before the law. We are also said to be equal in the opportunity to obtain power. Equality among people is also an ancient ideal, created as an antinomy to inequality. Plato raised it to the level of transcendent ideas, where it is to shine among other ideas as a star on our journey through history and lure us to itself. Nietzsche said that "we are already accustomed to teachings about human equality, but not to equality itself." In relation to this, our nature is stronger than our intentions, and I don't have to mention again what equality looks like before the law.

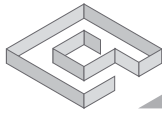


The power struggle keeps going on beneath the surface of our lives; multiple interests and corruption leave equality only on paper. The law can also be interpreted in many ways and it is remarkable in how many ways it can be twisted in order to prove that one's actions are consistent with it. We don't have to go far in search of examples; it suffices to look around oneself. In this respect, capitalism and democracy do not have much new to offer. They even undermine the very equality which they codify. Equality and inequality are in a constant and multifaceted conflict throughout history, since a man remains a man in any socio-political system.

These two opposites, among others, are in a constant struggle in history. A natural one, which is a part of us as creatures of nature, and a human or, I would say, a cultural one. We are culture-creating beings and we maintain that we are above nature and that we re-create it in ourselves, thus overpowering it. The very effort towards equality is to be one proof of that re-creation.

It is but an ideal, while inequality is the reality on the street. I believe that the originator of this ideal is resistance, dissatisfaction with the inequality of man and the need to





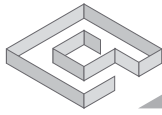
remove it. Why inequality when we are all human and in this at least we are therefore equal by nature?! Why inequality when we all are children of one God? The answer does not come from anywhere, and in the moments when we are existentially shaken we feel frighteningly alone and have to solve it for ourselves. And because there is a conflict between the reality and the ideal, it is the reality that often wins.

And so capitalism and democracy did not solve this problem, which is why I believe that they are not the last stage of history as we have already heard. There have been a few such stages already. Not long ago, it was supposed to be Nazism, and even more so communism, which fell before it even managed to be implemented. Our consolation is that both of these monstrous systems were swept away by the desire for freedom, tolerance, humanity, and the effort directed against a crude, selfish power. In other words, it was culture triumphing over nature.

It is, however, pointless to flatter ourselves that by culture we are rising above nature and are detaching from it. We are creatures of nature through and through and can rise above it only within nature itself. Culture is also a natural phenomenon and is weaker within us than raw nature because it is much younger.

A question arises whether we will ever arrive at a stage when an ideal will permanently win over reality. I think not, and neither is it desirable. For that to happen, we would have to surgically remove the aforementioned inequalities from man, but that would, in many respects, cripple social life, removing the competition between people that moves society and forces it to progress. The ancient Heraclitean saying: "war is the father and king of all" still holds. The thought that one day we should clone not only equal, but also identical people, people whose, as we say, own mother could not tell apart, horrifies me. What would such people do with each other? They would have no reason to play various games, having no need to win one over another, they would have no reason to discuss anything, no desire to be right or to push for anything. Alternatively, they could all fight each other, because they would all desire to win. And we already know what they would be useful for: they would make good soldiers. That is, however, what we are least interested in. The purpose of ideals is not for them to be achieved, but for them to attract us. Whether we like it or not, we are set for this life and for contradictions in the world, and by accepting this life, we have accepted evil in a thousand forms. We will forever and again fight against it, but not in vain because in doing so we will earn something along the way as well. Otherwise, life would have no meaning for us.

Therefore we ask: If disparity and inequality are inevitable, where have we got with them so far? History shows us that, even morally, we have reached certain successes. We have gained a greater sensitivity to the pain and suffering of other people. We care about them a lot more and in this we have even gone so far that we have created unprecedented challenges and contradictions, which will be precisely upon you, the young generation, just grasping the oars of social life, to address and resolve. I will only mention some that are already generally known: overpopulation, increase of life expectancy, care for the sick, who would otherwise be mercilessly eliminated by mother nature, rising demands



for a comfortable life, and therefore also rising demands from nature, leading to ecological crises, etc. The medical sciences get accused of this most frequently – and get accused wrongly, because they are only fulfilling their moral obligations. On the one hand, we have to do that, but on the other, we know that we are getting ourselves into trouble. By removing one evil, another emerges and will always remain our faithful companion.

How to get out of this paradox? I think that in regards to nature, it is not so difficult. As Francis Bacon observed, nature will not concede an inch; we can only win over it by obedience. In our case, this means accepting inequality as a fact, as inevitable and permanent. This requires tolerance, humility, and the realization that even those who rise above us don't have any part in this "gift," but that they had to work hard not to hoard their money and to give something back to the society. For it is often they who move us forward in history. Of course, this is true about honest people and not about those gifted self-seeking ladder-climbing go-getters, who are many among us and who are, unfortunately, also doing very well. Because nature does not create the good and the bad. We make these distinctions ourselves and review them often.

It's harder with social necessity, because here, man with his uncertainty of knowing and judging is at stake. All the things that were inevitable in history fell to their demise! During the World War II, Nazism and its world domination with a superior pure race at the forefront was supposed to be inevitable, after that it was communism led by the working class and the communist party. What is left of them? Only a bitter taste in the mouth, and for some, also nostalgia.

Even today, we still have many different social necessities. Fortunately, they are not dictated to us from above by any political saviour and we can choose freely from many of these. Each person will likely choose according to his or her personal inclination. I gladly believe that you, dear student friends, will manage to find your place in this complex social net, and not only outwardly, e.g. a good source of income, but also within you, which is often more important than the former. And I also gladly believe that you will succeed in steering our lives so that you can help solve many of those contradictions that have haunted us and thus take part in pushing our society forward. The recently deceased American new pragmatist Rorty very aptly said that we humans are joined by "the sensitivity to pain and in particular to the specific pain that distinguishes us from animals – the pain of humiliation." Spinoza has remarked long before him that the hardest thing for a man to bear is to be commanded by another man, an equal being. I wish you to experience the least amount of this humiliation and commandeering, but also to be able to work on their removal from your lives.

Therefore, I wish you good health and vigour for your work and many successes in it.